11-24-2014

Cultural Proximity and Reflexivity in Interpreting Transnational Media Texts: The Case of Malaysians Consuming Japanese Popular Culture

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Abstract

Television programs such as animation and drama series from Japan have become common transnational products in Malaysia. Since studies on Malaysians who consume Japanese popular culture are lacking even a decade after its substantial rise in popularity, this qualitative study was designed to explore the media consumption of Japanese popular culture in Malaysia. In this article I examined how Malaysians are interpreting their favorite media texts from Japan specifically revisiting the concepts of "cultural proximity" and "reflexivity" suggested in the other studies of Japanese popular culture and the audience. I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 participants who have been consuming various Japanese popular cultural products over the years, and thematically analyzed transcribed audio-recordings of the interviews. Individual proximity in the particular life stage was found in their favorite media texts, and that was a part of their pleasure in addition to enjoying encountering foreignness, which they did not find or accept in their real lives. Transnational media texts of Japanese popular culture are suggested to be potential materials to reflect upon and discuss the individual proximity in people, social issues, or phenomenon rather than essential "culture" which is often associated with national or ethnic origin.

Keywords

Cultural Proximity, Reflexivity, Japanese Popular Culture, Transnational Media Text, Malaysian, Interview-Based Qualitative Research

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Television programs such as animation and drama series from Japan have become common transnational products in Malaysia. Since studies on Malaysians who consume Japanese popular culture are lacking even a decade after its substantial rise in popularity, this qualitative study was designed to explore the media consumption of Japanese popular culture in Malaysia. In this article I examined how Malaysians are interpreting their favorite media texts from Japan specifically revisiting the concepts of "cultural proximity" and "reflexivity" suggested in the other studies of Japanese popular culture and the audience. I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 participants who have been consuming various Japanese popular cultural products over the years, and thematically analyzed transcribed audio-recordings of the interviews. Individual proximity in the particular life stage was found in their favorite media texts, and that was a part of their pleasure in addition to enjoying encountering foreignness, which they did not find or accept in their real lives. Transnational media texts of Japanese popular culture are suggested to be potential materials to reflect upon and discuss the individual proximity in people, social issues, or phenomenon rather than essential "culture" which is often associated with national or ethnic origin. Keywords: Cultural Proximity, Reflexivity, Japanese Popular Culture, Transnational Media Text, Malaysian, Interview-Based Qualitative Research

In developing countries, many foreign products are imported for local broadcasting. In Malaysia, the media entertainment industries have relied heavily on imported products. According to Wang (2010), broadcast hours of foreign programs in Malaysia accounted for more than half of the total broadcast time among four local channels in 2002. The influence of foreign programs on Malaysian youth has been a concern for a long time. In early 2000, American influence on Malaysian television (TV) was seen as a problem, including the formats of local TV programs and language use (Pawanteh, 2006). In late 2000, Malaysian policy makers expressed anxiety over the number of imported television drama series from neighboring countries, such as those from Indonesia and Thailand that were broadcast on the local channels (Hamzah & Md Syed, 2008). In spite of having favorable comments from local scholars (e.g., Pawanteh, 2006) about the imported programs from Asian countries compared to those from Western countries, imported programs as a whole were still considered to be a negative influence on Malaysians' mindset. Free circulation of any uncensored product from outside Malaysia can be a problem because maintaining moral values in a religiously and ethnically diversified society is a serious matter in Malaysia. In fact, the Malaysian government has given exceptional attention to issues on ethnic relations and interreligious matters since major ethnic conflict occurred in 1969 to maintain political and economic stability within the country (Hashim & Mahpuz, 2011). According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code (The Communications & Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia, 2004), "The Communication and Multimedia Act prohibits content that is indecent, obscene,

false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass any person" (p. 12). Foreign TV programs were selected and altered according to this Content Code, while the contents of Internet pages and audio-visual files uploaded to the Internet are not censored as long as the contents do not threaten national security or touch on sensitive issues related to religion and ethnicity (Rahim & Pawanteh, 2011).

TV programs from Japan are one of the main foreign programs imported to Malaysia (Rahim & Pawanteh, 2011). Japanese drama series (J-drama) and animation (anime) have aired on local channels and their DVDs have been sold at the local shops for decades. According to interviews conducted among university students in 2006 (Yamato & Mamat, 2007), the Internet and self-copied media files with English subtitles emerged as new mediums of J-drama as well as anime around 2004. In addition, Hu (2005) reported that various visual content, such as TV programs and films, began to be circulated for free following the innovation of a peer-to-peer (P2P) transfer protocol. She also noted from her observation of Chinese fans' websites dedicated to J-drama that Malaysian Chinese participated in online discussions with fans from other countries. This indicated that Malaysian Chinese speakers also obtained J-dramas with Chinese subtitles on the Internet. Iwabuchi (2011) highlighted the transnational flows and connections of media culture such as TV drama, animation, film, and music within East Asia. However, Hu's note and my observations about consumption of Japanese popular culture implied that people in Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country, is not far behind in these transnational flows.

In this context, I conducted a qualitative study to explore and understand media consumption of Japanese popular culture including J-drama and anime among Malaysian adults. According to Storey (2006), a common meaning among the various definitions of the popular culture is "a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization" (p. 1). For this study, a popular cultural product is considered a commercially produced item for mass consumption which is associated with leisure and the mass media. Specifically, I focus on popular cultural products which are circulated in media formats such as J-drama (Japanese drama series for TV), anime (animation for TV programs and films), and manga (comics for both magazines and books). Reception and audience studies of Japanese popular culture conducted in East Asian countries and the United States focused on limited titles or formats. However, Japanese popular cultural products are interconnected in the production process among the different formats (see reference to "media mix" of "media franchise" in Aoyama & Izushi, 2003). Malaysians also did not stick to only one format or one title when they consumed the products from Japan (Yamato & Mamat, 2007). For these reasons, I did not limit formats or titles at the beginning of this study.

In this article I examine how Malaysians are interpreting their favorite media text from Japan. It specifically revisits the argument of "cultural proximity" and "reflexivity" suggested in other studies of Japanese popular culture and audience studies. Since the 1980s, studies on television audiences conducted in Western countries revealed people's understanding of media texts is a complex cultural practice as the audience negotiates with the media texts in everyday life (Ang, 2011). From the late 1990s onward, development of the Internet and satellite TV enable more people to access media texts other than domestic ones (Iwabuchi, 2011; Straubhaar, 2008). The negotiation with the media texts is, thus, more complex than ever before, and yet more crucial to investigate under recent condition especially for younger generation.

Literature Review

Reception of Japanese Popular Culture Outside Japan

At the end of the 1990s, after witnessing the emerging popularity of Japanese popular culture across national borders, some scholars (e.g., Iwabuchi, 1998; Leung, 2002) from East Asian countries had begun to consider reception of popular culture as a subject of academic inquiry. Iwabuchi (1998) coined the term "culturally odorless" to identify characteristics of Japanese popular culture that explain its popularity outside of Japan. The term refers to "stateless" or the lack of national cultural representation. However, other scholars (Leung, 2002; Lee, 2006; Pellitteri, 2008) later pointed out that the representation of "Japan" or "Japanese-ness" in J-drama and anime was acquired by the viewers, so that the "culturally odorless" aspect was not the only reason for the popularity of Japanese popular culture outside Japan. From focus group interviews among female viewers of J-dramas in Hong Kong, Leung (2002) discovered that the viewers found "Japanese-ness" in the content of dramas with which they were unfamiliar. At the same time, romantic elements in love stories, characters' appearance, and a similar economic status as Hong Kong could be considered "culturally odorless." Leung also pointed out that the younger generation tended to rely on popular media as a window to the outside world because they had limited sources to obtain information about societies outside of Hong Kong. J-drama was the source to get to know about Japan, especially among the younger generation who cannot travel to Japan.

Lee (2006) conducted study about the images of Japan restructured by J-dramas in Taiwan, employing textual analysis of J-dramas and interviews. According to this study, J-drama has the advertising effect of promoting positive images of Japan. Most interviewees in this study maintained their positive views towards Japan even after facing unpleasant experiences during their trips to Japan. Contrary to Lee's expectation that the viewers of the J-drama would be disillusioned because they were unaware of the negative aspects of the people or discourse depicted in the J-drama, the Taiwanese viewers' perceptions of Japan were not easily shaken even when facing reality. This study and Leung's study (2002) imply that the consumption of imported popular cultural products influence the formation of a stereotypical judgment towards the country of the media producer.

In terms of other formats of Japanese popular culture, anime and manga, Pellitteri (2008) and Napier (2007) remarked in their essays that anime and manga fans in the United States and Europe enjoyed the typical Japanese culture or "Japanese-ness" of Japanese popular culture to a certain extent. Napier (2007) found during a series of ethnographic investigations about anime fans in the United States that the anime fans were ethnically diverse. The fans were also interested in reading about Japanese history, learning the Japanese language, and had a desire to know more about the real Japan. This was contrast to Napier's own statement (2007): Back in the 1990s, anime fans, who were mostly Asian American, liked the science fiction genre which is assumed to be "culturally odorless" because the stories are about the far future or another world.   Allison (2008) also described in her essay, "The Attractions of the J-wave for American Youth," that American anime and manga fans found pleasure in cultural differences even though they preferred fantasy and science fiction within the anime genre which was considered "culturally odorless."

Cultural Proximity and Reflexivity

According to both studies about East Asian viewers of J-drama and American fans of anime and manga, binary aspects, "Japanese-ness" and "culturally odorlessness" are part of the appeal of Japanese popular culture. To further examine what is "culturally odorless" and what

is not, to introduce another term, "cultural proximity" is useful. Straubhaar (as cited in Georgiou, 2012) defined "cultural proximity" as "nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements" (p. 871). Castelló (2010), who conducted in-depth interviews with producers and focus group interviews with viewers of Catalan soap operas in Spain, reaffirmed that elements stimulating the feeling of proximity are not only national, linguistic, or geographical in a broader sense. Rather, they are related to a social or personal setting such as an area of residence, educational background, media consumption, habits of viewers, as well as viewers' own feelings and personal problems.

Among the studies of J-drama in Asian regions, Nakano and Wu (2003), who conducted interview-based research across major cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Nanjing, found the aspect of "cultural proximity" in the comments among the university students. The proximity to J-drama among these Chinese students was not only attributed to a physical feature, value, belief or custom as "Chinese." These students shared many belongings and activities depicted in the J-dramas. Focus group interviews conducted in Singapore (MacLachlan & Chua, 2003) also found that the single women in their 20s showed a deeper empathy with the Japanese female protagonist who was a young working woman even though they disapproved of incorporating the sexuality depicted in the J-drama into their daily practice. The Singaporean government forced the image of an ideal Asian woman on Singaporean women with the policy of preferential treatment and the regulations on marriage and childbirth. With this as the background, MacLachlan and Chua's study revealed that the J-drama provided a space for young Singaporean women to explore their own stance towards these government policies.

In studies to identify proximity and distance in viewing J-drama, the negotiations between viewers and parts of media texts in a particular situation were observed. In addition to the studies about the J-drama audience, Georgiou (2012) illustrated "distance" and "proximity" through consumption of transnational Arabic soap operas among the Arab diaspora in London. Her focus group research revealed that the soap opera viewing bears an important role in sustaining a gendered critical and reflexive proximity to the Arab world. In the other studies, "reflexivity" was not discussed along the line of "cultural proximity," but I consider "reflexivity" as useful concept to examine the interpretation of transnational media texts. In fact, it seems to be related to "cultural proximity" since "proximity" is not only a static aspect in media viewing.

Lee (2008) reported that the fans used J-drama viewing as a sort of resistance against their own society or traditional norms in her study about a J-drama online fan club in South Korea. Lee's ethnographic study combing face-to-face interviews and observation of online entries compared their viewing pleasure when watching the J-drama and their local Korean dramas (K-drama). Their main complaints about K-dramas were the tiredness of pure romance, too much emphasis on class issues as an obstacle to romance, the conservative depictions of women, and the presentation of perfect masculinity. The fans also developed a flexible subjectivity as they had empathy with characters in the J-dramas while incisively criticizing some content such as the excess nationalistic or political discourses they found in some J-dramas. The J-drama provided diverse narratives rather than "cultural proximity" or "foreignness" (Japanese-ness). Their flexible subjectivity and a sharing space among fans allowed them to be expressive about resisting social cultural norms or political hegemony.

In similar vein, Hu (2008) discussed Chinese J-drama fans' online practices based on writings obtained from a forum and blogs among the fans who participated in online discussions on a Taiwan-based website. The fans wrote about not only J-drama itself, but also the positioning on the self and anxiety in their own traditional society. Hu highlighted "narrative reflexivity" as a characteristic of a J-drama narrative. It refers to "re-examinations

of the self and the self's relation to others and social issues" (p. 116). She also pointed out that Chinese online fans of J-drama used its narrative as a therapeutic means to encourage themselves to reflect on life, and the reflective thoughts could be stimulated to aid in developing individual growth. Other than J-drama, Huang (2008) and Kawazu (2008) conducted interview-based researches on the audience of American TV sitcom *Sex and the City* in Taiwan and Japan, respectively. Both studies also highlighted reflexivity and negotiations of one's own social position related to lifestyle and open sexuality. Huang (2008) argued that people utilize transnational media texts to reflect on existing norms in their own society and then to determine or reconsider their stance.

Similarly, in the case study based on in-depth interviews of anime fans in the United States, Park (2005) reported that young "spiritual seekers" who were fed up with conforming religious elements and the American way of life sought their own religious identity in the process of consuming anime and developed their own spiritual beliefs and practices in individual ways. Supporting by focus group interviews, and textual analysis of fan websites, it was not because the fans were active viewers of anime which depicts different religious beliefs. Rather, they happened to be "spiritual seekers," and anime as well as other formats of popular cultural products provided them with the resources to construct or reinforce their religious identity. In other words, popular culture has provided them with the opportunities to resist being followers of a dominant religion in their society. In Park's study, these anime fans were interpreting the texts beyond their understanding of the storyline and used them in their own lives.

Interpreting transnational media texts such as Japanese popular culture outside Japan, is involved negotiating with both aspects of proximity and distance. Viewers use the transnational media text to reflect and reaffirm each individual position within each society. Most audience studies that discussed "cultural proximity" and "reflexivity" focus on limited titles or a format consumed at a particular point of time. However, as Kawazu (2008) suggested conducting more audience studies focusing on diachronic experiences of viewers, interpretation of transnational media texts is needed to be also examined including dimension of the viewers' life and consumption history as well as their experiences with various texts. That is one area to be explored in the era of information communication technology since various media texts are becoming available to individuals across geographical and political boundaries of societies.

Methods

This article presents part of the results of a research project exploring individual consumption experiences including the way the products were bought, selected, obtained, shared, and embedded in everyday practices over extended periods of time. I employed an interview-based qualitative research design. According to a preliminary study (Yamato & Mamat, 2007), it seemed that frequent consumers of Japanese popular culture relied heavily on files provided on websites free of charge. This practice was considered a personal activity involving the consumer's intention. Thus, it was most appropriate to generate the data from one-on-one interviews to describe individuals' consumption of Japanese popular culture.

Participants

I used criterion-sampling techniques to recruit suitable participants. One of the criteria was a Malaysian who was a regular consumer of Japanese popular cultural products at the time of the interviews. This was to generate a rich description of research topic. Another criterion was a willingness to talk about his/her experiences in English. As this study was designed to understand the consumption experiences through interactions between participants and a

researcher, the participants should agree to be involved in data generation process eagerly. I also added English requirement for participants to be able to directly communicate with me as a researcher, who does not have proficiency in their mother tongues. Based on the criteria, eight participants were identified through acquaintances who worked in educational institutions in Malaysia, and then other four participants were recruited by snowball sampling technique. The background including formats of Japanese popular culture consumed, gender and ethnicity were taken into consideration when selecting additional participants. Diversity of the participants was not intended for generalization of the result for this study, but rather for enhancing "possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Laverty, 2003, p. 29). The number of participants was determined according to the quality of the data collected and findings, and reaching saturation, that is the point at which the researcher's understandings are not altered through further discussion with the participants (Laverty, 2003). I conducted interviews with 10 participants. An additional two participants were interviewed to make sure that I had reached a point of saturation.

Study participants were born between 1977 and 1990, consist of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia (five Malays, six Chinese, and one Indian), and there were an equal number of females and males. Nine of them were university students at the time of the first interview. Three of them were university graduates working full-time. Among the participants, only Yong (All participants' names used in this article are pseudonyms.) had been to Japan for a short business trip. Their degree of consuming three major formats of Japanese popular cultural products (J-drama, anime, and manga) varied and nobody consumed only one format. However, their way of obtaining these products was the same. For all, the Internet was a major tool in obtaining the products from Japan.

Data Generation

Figure 1 shows the steps of data generation. Because both data generation and analysis were conducted concurrently, data analysis steps are also included in Figure 1. Prior to the first interview, all participants were asked to write answers for four demographic questions and four questions related to the interview topics, including the URL of the website which they used for getting information about or downloading the products, titles of recently consumed Japanese popular culture, and their favorite products. Based on these answers, some people were not contacted for the interview since they seemed not to have rich experiences in consuming Japanese popular culture.

All interviews were conducted in Klang Valley, an urban region of Malaysia, from September 2009 to May 2010. Only interviews for Wen, who was a participant of a pilot study, were conducted in November 2008 and April 2009. For four students (Wen, Ayu, Chun, and Jun), who were attached to the university I worked, the briefings and interviews were conducted on campus when they were not taking my Japanese language course. For the others, whom I established contact through acquaintances and earlier participants, I explained the overview and the procedure of the research by email. Before contributing in this research project, all participants signed an informed written consent. With the participants' permission, all interviews were recorded with two digital audio recorders and these audio files were stored in a secure location.

The first interview was semi-structured and I posed questions according to the answers from the questionnaire. At the final stage of the first interviews I used the Interview Guide (see Appendix) to ensure that the interview covered as many of their experiential aspects as possible. In the second interview, I used a member checking technique to build a shared understanding between each participant and me as an interviewer. Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) noted, "[A]ccording to the interpretive paradigm, meanings are constructed by human beings

in unique ways, depending on their context and personal frames of reference as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (p. 614). That means there was a possibility that multiple constructed realities existed in accordance with their subjective experiences. Thus, second interviews were conducted as part of the reflective process. The member checking technique is often used as a method to enhance the credibility of the research. For this study, though, it was one of the techniques for data generation so as to create a reflective participatory framework suggested by Doyle (2007). Besides the original purpose to consolidate shared understandings and reflect upon them further, the second interview covered modifications to the descriptions or accounts, and elaborations of certain words and expressions from the first interview.

Figure 1. Data Generation Steps
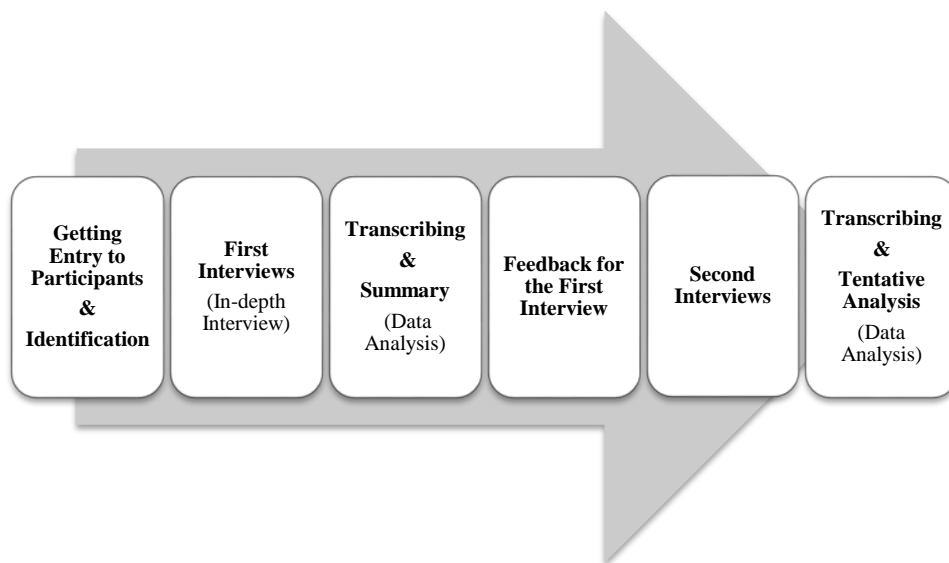
I arranged to interview 10 participants for a second time. Two participants (Manaf and Gadin) were not interviewed twice because of their busy schedule. Most of the participants brought part of their collection of Japanese popular culture to the second interview. Soft copies were saved on my laptop computer. If they brought books and other merchandise, I took photos. One participant, Yong, did not have time to share his collection. His second interview was short at 50 minutes since it was conducted during a break from his second job. Other interviews lasted more than one hour. The longest second interview took 3 hours because parts of the participants' media files were viewed during the interview. I viewed all media files provided by the participants after each interview. The products mentioned by the participants were also viewed or read partly through the Internet, and when I was in Japan. Content summaries of the key products and my thoughts were noted in the reflective journal to aid analysis.

Analysis

After the first contact with each participant, my comments to the participants, thoughts, and observations were recorded in a reflective journal. Any thought that came to mind during the transcription process was also recorded in my journal. After I transcribed each interview, the transcribed text was checked again by listening to each audio file. Qualitative data management software NVivo 8 (QSR International, 2008) was used to sort out paragraphs or sentences according to tentative categories which represent events in time sequence (e.g.,

"Recent-Viewing/Past-Viewing") or particular descriptions (e.g. "Understanding-Content"). I revised some categories (e.g. "Language Learning" changed to "Extension") or added sub-categories (e.g. "Sexual Issues" was added under "Understanding-Content") while reading sortied paragraphs or sentences again. When these steps were taken, I summarized the content of each interview using a table divided into the categories. When I found outstanding phrases or sentences which needed to be probed in the second interview, I copied and pasted them in the summary table according to the categories. The participants read summarized sentences and some extracts of the first interview before the second interview in order to confirm the content of the first interview. I also read the summary and typed further questions or interpretations next to the summarized sentences in a new column as preparation for the second interview. The second interviews were conducted based on the summary table, and then transcribed verbatim and sorted out according to existing categories using NVivo 8. The categories were refined whenever it was necessary while merging the data from different participants. After completing this procedure for three participants, the initial findings were summarized based on the notes in the journal. Tentative themes were developed by referring to thematic analysis, which involves converging and reporting the participants' viewpoints, the researcher's reflection, and other data sources (Doyle, 2007). The tentative themes related to "Interpretation of Text" at this stage were "Negotiating Based on Their Position," "Accounting for Their Choice in Universal Value" and so on.

After completing the second interviews with the first five participants, all transcriptions which were in the related categories were read through, and then prominent sentences or paragraphs were extracted to "describe an aspect of the structure of lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 87). These extracts were read through again and grouped if any theme emerged. The grouping of the extracts and their order were changed a few times while refining themes. I identified following themes related to "Understanding/Interpretation" at this point: "With Pre-Understanding," "New Perspective," "Malaysia vs Japan," "Negotiation with Own Position," and "Fiction or Real". I then wrote descriptions of each theme based on the document with the extracts. The original transcriptions of each participant were referred to when deciding which sentences or parts of a sentence were quoted in the descriptions. The meaning of each sentence was confirmed in the context of each interview. Each additional participant's interview was processed in the same manner as the first five participants'. Emerging themes and tentative descriptions of each theme were showed to another researcher who is familiar with qualitative research before deciding to stop interviewing. The descriptions of each theme were refined until reaching saturation.

Results

The ways selected Malaysian adults had interpreted media texts of Japanese popular culture are discussed according to three themes. The first theme, "Growing Up: From Fantasy to Reality," explores the way the study participants consumed and understood different Japanese popular cultural products while growing up. The second, "Generating Thinking," illustrates the way they interpret media texts from Japan regardless of the different formats. Lastly, the theme, "It Doesn't Affect Me, It's About Them," focuses on how they dealt with the media texts which include unfamiliar aspects based on the social norms in their own society. To improve readability of the description of each theme, the quotes from the interview transcriptions were corrected for errors in grammar and syntax as long as the alteration did not change the original meaning for this article.

Growing Up: From Fantasy to Reality

All participants of this study recalled that they had watched anime on local television channels or read translated manga since childhood. While growing up, some of them found a "reality" which was reflected in their lives although they were well aware that the stories were fiction.

Chun, a 22-year-old university student, recalled her past and said, "When I was small, I use to dream that I'm one of the characters. . ." in the story. Later in the second interview, she added, "When you're small, you dream like you are magicians or all that. But now. . .we already know that. . .it's impossible to do that." The anime featuring female super girls, *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon* (Tomita & Sato, 1992-1993), was a memorable title from Chun's childhood, as well as Huan's and Wen's. Huan even used one of the characters' names from this anime as her email address. At the time of the interviews, Wen, Rosila, and Jun preferred consuming live-action products such as J-drama because the live-action seemed to depict a more realistic world. On the other hand, the other participants who still continued to engage in viewing anime and reading manga now preferred mature storylines from these formats.

Five (Ayu, Chun, Gadin, Huan, and Zaki) participants clearly stated that they looked for more mature content compared to that encountered during their teenage years. They also used these products with mature content indirectly as a tool to make sense of the world surrounding them. Zaki had watched TV anime and *tokusatsu* (an abbreviation of *tokushu satsuei* [special filming]) series for children, such as superhero and giant robot shows, and had read Malay translation of boys' manga since his childhood. He also had the opportunity to explore more and different kinds of anime at university. He described what he had consumed before entering the university by using current popular anime series among youngsters as examples:

> [I]f you look at...*Naruto* (Kishimoto & Date, 2002-2007)...can you actually imagine, real *ninja* wearing orange jumpsuit [laugh] I mean *ninja* not supposed to wear bright orange suits, right? At some point, you just accept that kind of things, that's *shonen* [boys genre], *shonen*'s theme is mostly involves around friendship, *nakama* [fellow], and usually...*dokyou to konjou* [guts and soul]...usually blend of action and comedy, and...very simple dialogue, easy for teenager to understand and digest.

In university, his consumption target was the so-called *seinen* (young adult) genre. He looked for stories involving political conspiracy, dealing with terrorism, and those about normal life as an adult. He described one of his favorite anime stories as follows:

> You have people living in the space station, and they go to cafeteria and eat. They deal with stupid bosses...tight deadlines...ship mechanic...Story is presented not in the fantastic kind of way, not like *Star Trek* (Roddenberry, 1966-1969) or *Star Wars* (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977). But it shows daily life...[about *Planetes* (Okouchi &Taniguchi, 2003-2004)].

This anime depicted how the leading character was torn between his dream and reality as he dealt with his everyday work of collecting debris in space. The background of the story, colleting debris in space, was not real. However, the depiction of life of working adults was the part Zaki appreciated. At the end of the story, the character finally took the necessary step to fulfill his dream. Gadin, who also liked this anime, said,

Naruto (Kishimoto & Date, 2002-2007) is like yei-, I must go and beat up everyone, you know, it's not like that. He [protagonist] is scared he is very doubtful, he wonder he can do it, yet, he want to be [astronaut]...slowly he push himself, and people around him, you know, given him confidence to do it.

That's quite number of ah-, very complex relationship between all the characters, he and his boss, he and his colleagues, he and this new colleagues, rookie colleagues of him.

Gadin took 2 months to finally find right mood and time to watch this anime after getting a soft copy of the series. He noted, "I just went through few episodes quickly and OK, this is not something you watch just to pass time or over your lunch." But when he explained the time he began to watch this anime series, he added, "I couldn't stop [snapps fingers] watching it." Watching this anime was an example he gave to explain his assertion: "I enjoy seeing or watching or reading about complex human relationships. . .I take anime seriously."

All the participants had their own preferences for genre or type of story among Japanese popular cultural products. Chun explained one of her favorite manga, and said stories of anime and manga presented an ideal life which is "better than real life." She continued: "You see, if you are very normal girl but being surrounded by very rich guys. . .of course very good, but in real life, we won't encounter such a situation." Instead of indulging in fantasy, she enjoyed discovering good human relationships, unexpected incidents happening in the story, and comical depictions, which she found entertaining. She explained:

[F]or *Skip Beat* (Nakamura, 2002-ongoing), it's like the girl is very poor...but she was surrounded by many good friends that keep on helping her. In the real life, it is not necessary you can get kind of friends...whether you are rich or not.

Some of the popular manga stories mentioned by the female participants, such as *Skip Beat* (2002-ongoing), *Fruit Basket* (Takaya, 1999-2006) and *Boys Over Flowers* (Kamio, 1992-2003) featured an ordinary girl as the female protagonist. As Chun pointed out, it is not realistic to dream to be exactly in the same situation as the character, though there are parts which they can see themselves in the character as they are also ordinary girls. Wen said, "I prefer the kind of friendship in the drama but sometimes in real life when I cannot. . .reach the kind of the friendship, I will try to treat my friend well." Some of her favorite drama stories were set in pre-university or university days. She said that the characters' lifestyles were different because they were students in Japan, but she could still relate to them because she was also a student.

Moreover, Gadin's following account shows whether or not a particular individual feels a creative world as real depends on the time and the individual's background when the product is consumed:

It's very realistic (Interviewer: realistic?) Ya, because...situation is similar to what I'm going through with story in *Genshiken* (Kio & Ikehata, 2004). It is about members of visual cultural society. You know they do *dojin* [amateur manga]; they talk about anime...they go through things that similar what EMiNA [anime club at Gadin's university] go through.

Gadin was a member of the anime club at his university at the time of the interview. This anime was one of his favorites, and the "reality" of the storyline and the depictions of characters were the reasons he liked this anime. He explained, "I can imagine if these people are real, this is

what. . .they do, because. . .I can actually see some of their [anime characters'] personalities in some of my friends." If he had not been involved in the student's anime club (EMiNA), or if he had not had much experience in consuming anime before viewing this anime, then the story would have meant something different to him. Yong also commented about the same anime:

> The culture that you find within it, how the anime club works, exactly like how [the anime club works in] Malaysia, Singapore, America right now...They [club members] feel like they are watching themselves because *Genshiken* actually ah-, portray anime fans, so you can find a lot of similarity with the show.

Because Gadin and Yong grew up to be anime fans, they could say this anime portrayed real anime fans. The reality each participant found in Japanese popular culture varied and was grounded on their experiences in real life.

Generating Thinking

Ayu, Jun, Lok, Rosila, and Zaki said that their consumption of Japanese popular culture was not only for leisure time. These viewings or readings helped generate thoughts based on the stories. Ayu had praise for manga despite criticisms from some of her friends that manga is for children; she said, "Because usually they (stories) generate our thinking. It has many philosophy or mythology...It makes us think." Whether the story indicated a parallel way of thinking in line with her existing thoughts was not important to her. She explained: "Because actually there is no absolutely truth in this world just we have to find it. So it's up to that person to believe what is truth and what is not." Ayu also claimed that anime and manga had an influence on her way of thinking:

> Basically at school and also at home, people will say stealing is bad, and good thing is study...When I watch anime, in the certain circumstance...something wrong become right; like they are stealing but they are trying to save his friend...so...we can't really decide right and wrong so quickly.

In her life so far, she had learned many things; however, she had found that what she had thought was right from her own experience could be wrong or the other way around through anime and manga. She recognized while consuming anime and manga that people needed to perceive things from different perspectives before making a final judgment.

Lok also claimed that Japanese popular cultural products made him think as he denied that action anime just depicts fighting by saying, "Like [Mobil Suit] *Gundam 00* [anime (Kuroda & Mizushima, 2007-2009)], and also *Code Geass* [anime (Okouchi & Taniguchi, 2006-2007)]...I found that...actually these anime are like war movie, fight each other, but having communication...to try not to have war in the world." Unlike Ayu, though, Lok did not say that anime and manga had a specific influence on his way of thinking. He said, "Sometimes I will think bit deep. Why this anime try to give the message to the people, because every movie have some kind of message to everybody." Jun, who said, "Sometimes story...let you think," gave examples from J-drama: "You should be very proud of your job, ah-, *jibun no shigoto ni hokori motte kudasai* [be proud of your own job], then because of that...you will be able to carry out your job [about *Code Blue* (Hayashi, Nishiura, & Hayama, 2008)]." When I probed further by mentioning that was not explicitly described, Jun replied, "Ah-, they won't tell directly but you see from the character, but that's my interpretation." He indicated that he interpreted the message from the character's attitude and behavior, even though he had no work experience.

In addition, Chun and Rosila pointed out that they looked for stories that include a moral value but they did not learn any moral value from the story. For example, Rosila had been concerned about the importance of punctuality since her school days. She said, with reference to Malaysians: "A lot of people are not so concern about the time...I really hate about." It is very stereotypical for her to assume that all Japanese are very punctual. What she had seen in the J-drama applied not only to people but also the social system, like the transportation system. She had been aware of the importance of punctuality, and what she saw in the J-drama confirmed her belief. People may think more about the matter in relation to their pre-understanding. Being punctual or the manner by which a train arrives at a station on time is just the background of the story. She pointed out many differences between her life in Malaysia and what she saw through J-drama and anime even though she was not only absorbed in things from Japan.

There were also matters that the study participants came to think about without having any pre-understanding or any past experiences. Zaki talked about anime with the label of "explicit content" as follows:

> *Black Lagoon* (Hiroe & Katabuchi, 2006) is story about pirates who go on the board and steal. They deal with Chinese mafia, Russian mafia, Venezuela mafia. . .and they live in the island in Thailand, this island is whole of criminal, that's nothing there but criminals. So when you live in that world of darkness, so to speak ah-, you tend to reflect things you do, even if you are criminal, even if you killed 100 people, you are not born evil, you know every child is born innocence, you just end up that way. . .the character reflect on what she has done.

The setting of the story for *Black Lagoon* is the early 1990s. As it is about pirates, it includes many violent scenes. However, Zaki pointed out that the author of this manga carefully created the background of each character, like how these characters ended up as criminals. The following is Zaki describing one of the characters in this story:

> Japanese men *Okajima*, he try to maintain sense of morality, he quickly discovers that ah-, you know in the situation like you have gun pointed to your head, your moral doesn't matter. I mean when you are in that situation, you might say oh-, justice, moral, freedom, ha, ha, ha, I don't care, I gonna shoot you anyway, so when he faces this kind of logic he has to think twice...whether or not he really believes in justice or whether he is been hypocrite.

This Japanese man was a typical Japanese businessman who grew up without experiencing difficulties in his life and incidentally joined a pirate group. Zaki explained further why he liked to buy English-translated manga, and did not just watch anime online for this story:

> I mean blood, violence, guns you know, all sort of stuff but ah-, the reason why I like it enough to actually buy it, I actually have several volume of this now. It's because ah-, ya, it takes reader seriously. It doesn't try to impose justice like oh-, I'm hero. I'm going to save as people as many people I can. No-. It doesn't try to lie about present reality as it is.

Zaki had not only enjoyed this kind of fiction as adventure but also as a reflection of reality which would exist in the world even though this was the reality he had not experienced yet. He was also impressed by how the author treats the readers as mature adults and logically handled the story even with its emphasis on entertainment value. The participants' ways of dealing with

the content of Japanese popular cultural products were maturing along with their continuing consumption. The content and the messages attracted their attention based on their interests, pre-understandings, and own experiences. More mature or complicated stories made them think of certain matters.

It Doesn't Affect Me, It's About Them

The worlds created within Japanese popular cultural products vary. There are stories in the far future, way back in the past, set in a real city in Japan, or depicting an unrealistic fictional society. Whatever setting the creator of the product chooses, the story might reflect the creator's culture, such as behavior, customs, beliefs, and thought. Six (Chun, Farah, Jun, Lock, Rosila, and Zaki) participants claimed that the more they viewed Japanese products, the more they understood "Japanese culture." Zaki stated that he would be surprised if the author of anime or manga "portrays German character acting like a German, instead of a German acting like Japanese." He also claimed that "after you watch enough anime, you understand the culture, eventually just understand." None of the participants asserted, however, that too much exposure to Japanese popular culture had changed their own behavior.

Rosila considered some of the things depicted in J-drama to be "Japanese culture" and she would "keep it to herself" as she would her knowledge about "Japanese culture." She found some practices among the Japanese to be good even though they differed from her own. After she gave some examples of different lifestyles and behavior she had seen in J-drama and anime, I asked whether there was anything Rosila felt was inappropriate. She responded as follows: "I'm Malay. . .we have low social life. . .we have a boundary between men and women. But in the drama, we have ah-, [pause] free lifestyle, is it? That cannot be done in Malaysia." She clarified the meaning of "low social life" further in the second interview:

> From my view, male and female cannot have close relationship before marriage because it can prevent most of the crime...I think like abuse, rape. And for Malay, we already prevent girls and boys from getting together. And also, we like to go out with same gender first.

She further mentioned the current situation of Malay society: "From my view, I am very traditional so I don't think it's good but I think mostly everyone does it, right now." She had seen unmarried Malay couples dating in public. She stressed that she was not going to follow suit, but she commented on the gender relationships depicted in the drama: "I just accept, this is just in the drama, I just learn that." What she called a free lifestyle was not just a matter of religious beliefs, as she also identified herself as a "traditional" type. However, even though she labeled herself "traditional," she accepted the "free lifestyle" she saw.

When she explained her criteria for selecting which J-drama to download, she highlighted the drama *Love Shuffle* (Nojima, Doi, & Yamamura, 2009) as a "new and fresh story" and described its story as follows:

> I think it is a new story for me, about...four couples. Four women and men switch the partner every two weeks...They date with the different person, so then they finally know which one is best for her or him.

This story included talk about and scenes of sexual relationships as I viewed and noted in the reflective journal: *"Love Shuffle*, episode 1: Because it is story how to. . .find a right partner, there are scenes of sexual relationship even [it is] not obvious depiction" (December 2009). In fact, this storyline was opposite to Rosila's practice in real life. However, she chose to

download and view this drama because it was something she had never seen before. She commented after reading the summary of her first interview: "New and fresh stories will make [me] interested to watch." She did not look for the same old stories in Japanese popular culture even though the stories depicted were opposite to her ways of thinking and behavior.

Farah, who had come across scenes of enjoying alcohol in J-drama and Japanese variety shows (talk shows or game shows) hosted by her favorite Japanese boy band, commented:

> I know my limit as Malay, because it is ah-...[pause]...We cannot go to the bar, drinking alcohol...but for Japanese...I read a lot of report, even my *sensei* [teacher] said Japanese are quite heavy drinkers. So I guess because they work hard they try to release their stress...They even watch the porn.

In Malaysia, alcohol is banned by the government and as Farah identified as Malay, the no alcohol rule is obligatory for all Malays who are Muslim. Since there are bars for non-Muslims in Malaysia, the consumption of alcohol is not rare behavior. It is one of several activities that Muslims are not supposed to do for pleasure but Farah rationalized it as necessary for Japanese people. Her understanding of the Japanese people was integrated with the knowledge that she had accumulated through other activities such as reading online reports from fans of her favorite boy band and taking a Japanese language course, which was motivated by her desire to know more about her favorite boy band, who are Japanese. Alternatively, the differences can be accepted without rationalizing them like Farah did. Ayu said:

> Maybe because Japanese is not my culture, when...they colored their hair, they have the kind of style, then cute. But when it's about Malay, if they have colored their hair, it is so plastic. You are Malay; just have your black hair. Maybe because we know how Malay is; we know how normally people in Malaysia like.

All behavior, customs, and ways of life depicted in Japanese popular culture can be considered as being not in her possession. Ayu explained that is the reason she could perceive it as is. Chun considered the consumption of anime and manga as her hobby, and so she claimed, "Even if the storyline I watch is...very opposite from my thinking I think I still watch it because it doesn't really affect me." What the participants considered to be Japanese culture was something different from what they practiced or believed in. In other words, they underwent filtration before deciding whether to take that matter as their own or treat it as something else. The participants had to deal with differences that are attributed to respective social practice and experiences. The differences are considered "foreignness." This foreignness is something that does not directly relate to them on the premise that they have their own identity as Malay, Muslim, or others.

Discussion

When the study participants were younger, they revealed they found a hero or heroine in Japanese popular culture with whom they could empathize. As they grew up, they also found characters they could relate to as ordinary girls, students, fans of Japanese popular culture, and so on. Some participants expressed their empathy with characters in the story, but they did not highlight a similar physical feature or cultural value as discussed in terms of "cultural proximity" in the study of J-drama reception (e.g., Nakano & Wu, 2003). All participants knew what they viewed and read in Japanese popular culture was not totally real. However, as Gadin used the word "realistic" to describe the characters of one particular anime, there were characters the participants empathized with and stories they could relate to their own lives. As

Kawazau (2008) analyzed in the study of a *Sex and the City* audience, the on-going lives of the participants including their pasts were integrated with the stories. The study participants chose Japanese popular culture because they had already accumulated a positive feeling towards Japanese-made products (see Yamato, 2012). When popular cultural products from another country are perceived favorably it indicates there is individual, segmented "proximity" in everyday life. Castelló (2010) also pointed out that "cultural proximity incorporates educative, cognitive and emotional elements and aspects related to the audience's immediate surroundings" (p. 207). Thus, interpretation of transnational media texts is more appropriate to discuss from the view of individualistic "proximity," not from the view of static or essential cultural "proximity."

Moreover, various messages encoded in the production process also assisted the study participants in developing their mindset for viewing Japanese popular culture in order to strike a balance between immersing themselves in fantasy and realizing reality. In terms of anime, Napier (2007) quoted parts of descriptions about anime by American fans as follows: "make you think about things a lot more deeply" and "no American cartoons ever show me that life is not all pretty" (p. 178). Napier summed up these aspects as the appeal of anime. Hu (2008) discussed similar comments about the J-drama narrative as "narrative reflexivity" and "therapy." In this study, the participants also illustrated their favorite entertainment genre was not just a meaningless way of passing time. From the simple moral values to complicated political issues, they liked the media texts that give them an opportunity to reflect upon their surroundings or themselves. Since this was the same among those who preferred J-drama (Rosila, Wen, Jun, and Farah) and those who preferred anime and manga in this study (Ayu, Chun, Gadin, Lok, Manaf, Yong, and Zaki), the narrative that makes a viewer/reader think and become reflective is not limited to certain formats of Japanese popular culture, such as just J-drama or anime. "Proximity" could be negotiated critically (Georgiou, 2012) based on individual interests, pre-understandings, and life experiences while interpreting media texts. Compared to domestic or localized texts that are assumed to be proximate to some extent, this "critical proximity" is more likely to be sensed while consuming transnational media texts because the transnational background of the text broadens viewers/readers' options between proximity and distance.

Therefore, it is important to highlight that the different lifestyles or behavior apart from the study participants' own lives were perceived in somewhat different ways, but the participants claimed that they were not influenced by what they perceived. As Rosila said, "I just learn" the differences attributing to religion or the other reasons, the participants perceived the differences as their knowledge and the matter to reflect their own position even though they were not acceptable in their society. One may find a rational account of why a particular depiction is acceptable in another society, like Farah commented, "Because they work hard they try to release their stress" about Japanese men's behavior. In fact, it is getting easier to find out more about the "foreignness" or what might be the truth on the other side of the world as some study participants searched other sources to understand more about things they found through the consumption of Japanese popular cultural products. In sum, viewers feel close to a certain part of the text, while distancing themselves from other parts according to their own stance. This distancing or "filtering as foreignness" can be a strategic way of interpreting transnational media texts. This is why some studies have concluded that the consumption of Japanese popular culture provides "space for resistance" (e.g., Lee, 2008; MacLachlan & Chua, 2003). In connection with the second theme, "Generating Thinking," the "foreignness" or differences found in the transnational media texts seem to be seriously perceived in the course of interpretation. The differences are explored further in the situation that the transnational media texts from the same origin are consciously chosen and continuously consumed. Their

interpretation is not necessarily placed or limited within the framework of the nation-state; for example, Japanese versus Malaysian.

The participants of this study presented their knowledge and ways of thinking through interviews with me even though all the conversations were specifically related to the consumption of entertainment. They followed different lifestyles, behavior, and beliefs, but thought about what was relevant and what they did in their own lives. The interpretation of transnational media texts involves exploring "proximity" and "foreignness."

This research project attempted to investigate ongoing media consumption from the individual viewpoint. Interpretation of media text was assumed to be in individual consumption process which embedded in society. The numbers of study participants were, thus, limited in order to obtain rich descriptions from each individual, and analysis of each media texts referred here was not as comprehensive as in textual analysis. In future research, though, it may be useful to investigate the potentiality of these texts in a group or educational setting in Malaysia to reflect upon the individual proximity in people, social issues, or phenomenon rather than the essential "culture" which is often associated with national or ethnic origin. Japanese popular cultural texts could be educational materials used to show and discuss a mixture of differences and similarities in a single text. To discuss transnational media texts like Japanese popular culture in Malaysia may avoid direct conflict among people who unconsciously assume extensive essential differences existing between different religious or ethnic groups.

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Appendix A
Interview Guide (Questions for the first interview)

Topic	Sub-topic	Questions
Current practice	Daily/weekly routine	Could you describe how you watched anime (drama) yesterday? [*when, where, with whom, how long, what is the medium, where did you get it*]
	Way to obtain	Could you describe your recent routine when watching anime (drama)?
	Motives	Could you describe how you get anime (drama)? [*source, way, cost, time*]
		How do you decide which one to watch? [*reason, source of info, way to search*]
		What made you choose Japanese products?
		What have you done other than watch them?
		What other entertainment products do you consume (watch) now?
		Which entertainment products do people around you (family) consume?
	(Consumption other than Japanese products)	What do you think about the illegal circulation of copyrighted products?
Past / Continuing practice	Starting	Could you tell me what was your first encounter (experience in) with anime (drama)? [*when, what is the medium, people around*]
	Continuation	How do you continue to engage with (watching) it?
	Collection	If you keep downloaded files or CDs, why do you keep them?
	Involvement with others	What do you do with your collection?
		(How) Do you share the products with others?
Understanding	Current products	Could you describe the storyline of _____? (What is the story?)
		Do you have any reason why you like the _____?
	Favorite products (contents, characters, stars, creators)	What is special / the best part of the products?
		How do you judge if the drama (anime) is good or not?
		What is special about Japanese anime (drama) and how does it compare to those from other countries?
		Have you ever been inspired or impressed by any of these products?
		Have you ever found anything you do not understand from the stories you watch or read?
Feeling, attitude or behavior	Individual activity	Have you ever done something different in your daily life after you watched or read any of these products?
		Do you think you have learned something from the products?
		Do you think you are influenced by the any Japanese products? In what way?
		If you could not get Japanese products what would you do?

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Article Citation

Yamato, E. (2014). Cultural proximity and reflexivity in interpreting transnational media texts: The case of Malaysians consuming Japanese popular culture. *The Qualitative Report, 19*(94), 1-20. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/yamato94.pdf