Otaku: Japan’s Subculture and How Youth Creates Its Own Alternative Markets

Within a fluid-like nature of the contemporary society, a section of the Japanese youths has crystallized what scholars would refer to as a kind of a subculture, popularly known as Otaku. Scholars have noted that it is one of the fast-growing ones, and so it forms one of the largest subcultures in contemporary Japan. In a movie directed by Jeffrey Clark, a good representation of the postmodern society with the impact of the Otaku subculture is presented (“True Otaku”). This subculture that was once disregarded has got global attention and has hit the economic headlines with a fast-growing competitive market share. The paradox that scholars have since raised is what distinctive feature Otaku has to make it spread so fast, how it began and qualified as a subculture unique from other similar groups and groupings. An exciting and yet distinctive feature about Otaku as a subculture is the purchasing behavior of adolescents of this particular culture that marks it out of the many subcultures on the global scale (Kitabayashi 12). The present paper seeks to trace back to the roots of Otaku and attempt to understand the various traits of this subculture. It also highlights how Otaku influences contemporary marketing trends and consumer behavior from a global perspective. Finally, this paper points on how the youth, who are the leading proponents of this subculture, creates their own alternative market.

**Historical Background**
With the advancement in technology, the fast accessibility of the Internet together with the populous growth of media consumption, many different subcultures are born, especially for the young growing generations (Niu, Chiang, and Tsai 713). Otaku, which can be considered a subculture that is popular among the youth and adolescents, was born in Japan. Having risen from the great fans of anime, manga and fictitious materials, the Otaku subculture is currently marking a global recognition, especially among the adolescents and the youths (Kam 19). This fast global widespread of the subculture raises curiosity to trace its originality in an attempt to answer the questions of how and why this culture has become so popular in Japan. Again, it will also help understand why and how this culture has gained global recognition and how it has made it a worldwide phenomenon among the growing generations.

The term Otaku has its derivation from the Japanese word that referred to another house or another family. In contemporary Japanese society, the term is used to refer to a fan or an individual who has a specific interest in a particular topic, theme or hobby, such as anime Otaku, manga Otaku, passion Otaku, etc. (Ito and Okabe 23). Some scholars use this term to refer to anime fans or manga fans. However, away from the Japanese society, the word Otaku is used negatively regarding any geek. Besides, to some scholars, the slang Otaku could be associated with individuals who have an intense obsession with the Japanese lifestyle, as well as their culture.

Subsequently, Kam (152), in his work, traced the originality of the term Otaku as it was first associated with fans of anime, manga, etc., who referred to one another as Otaku. They considered the usage as an overly formal way of saying “you.” In the similar following, some scholars have developed some theories to explain the originality of the term. Azuma (17) and Ito and Okabe (21) conceded in the argument that anime Otaku existed and participated in quite more extensive social networks where they traded goods and information. They both noted that even though those large
social networks had many social contacts, the Otaku was, however, not particularly associated with any of them (Azuma 27). Additionally, the social transactions within the Otaku networks tended mainly to be impersonal, short-lived and more businesslike.

Another theory that was used in a more deprecating manner is the theory pointed out by Kam. To this author, the term Otaku was used to refer to the idea that Otaku never left their homes (153). This definition depicted a more stereotypical concept that Otaku was a term that was associated with the badly antisocial group that is quite isolated from the rest of the world (Niu, Chiang, and Tsai 714). However, this contradicted the idea that it was a term used by fans to call themselves since the fans would often leave their homes to meet each other, especially in the marketplaces. A more generalized historical understanding of Otaku points to the definition as a term used by fans who are gathered as comic markets, fanzine meetings, and all-night line parties just before anime movie releases.

Kam (157), in his study, conceded that the usage of the term Otaku brings with it a robust conception obsessive liking for manga and anime materials. Further, sociologist Miyadai Shinji defines Otaku in the words of Kam as a group of "youths who inhabit the worlds, provided by media such as anime and science fiction that substitute for reality" (Kam 156). To Kam, Miyadai argued that this immersion in alternative worlds represented a particular and unique type of personality. He referred to this specific person as the gloomy laggard. According to Miyadai, this personality represented those who have a kind of character that often tends to minimize disappointments by withdrawing from areas that cause such disappointments or regions where such disappointments rise easily (Kam 156). Accordingly, therefore, regarding this argument, those who are associated with Otaku are but a manifestation of such personalities since they tend to withdraw from more active interpersonal relationships and even communication.
Notably, Otaku has gripped a considerable influence on its followers and lovers. Subsequently, owing to its strong influential impacts and global spread that the Otaku has on the Japanese youths grant it the crowning as a subculture. Thus, all those who are said to be the Otaku or associated with it have gradually been said to belong to a particular subculture (Kam 159). Since this subculture is said to consume lots of media, particularly those of anime and science fiction, an attendant assumption would be that this growing culture has a distinctive breed of people divorced from the world of reality.

Moreover, maybe as a response to why this popular subculture of Otaku finds its popularity tendrils concentrated among the growing generations and the youth, Azuma Hiroki, a postmodern philosopher, observed that Otaku represented a transition to post-modernity. According to him, the rapid consumption of Otaku materials among the growing generation is but a response to the fast collapse of ideologies, religious, social and shared values (Azuma 29). These grand narratives characterized the period of modernity: as such, the benefits of modernity were on their rapid decline. In summation, the Otaku subculture is but a representation of those people who are searching for effective stimulation within a system of society where the grand narratives are but dysfunctional (Kitabayashi 67).

As a subculture divorced from the world of reality, Otaku is quite unconcerned with the originality and authenticity of materials, since as Azuma pointed out that their preference to the anime character designs and settings to coherent plotlines. Again, at the expense of accurate elements that induce certain sensations, they often favor a particular style of speaking, stereotypical development of narrative or a specific curvature of figurines instead (Azuma 33). These summed characteristics form the founding database in Otaku consumption (Niu, Chiang, and Tsai 717). In his analysis, Azuma further demonstrated that it is through the already existent knowledge of the
database and its composite elements that influence commercial producers and fans in similar measure to engage in the production of the Otaku culture.

Otaku culture has an obsession with comics, animations, computer games and their rereading and reproduction of such in the form of fanzines, fan games and fan figures (Ito & Okabe 48). Moreover, Kitabayashi’s (52) reading of the philosopher Azuma postulated animalistic symbolism of the Otaku culture to assume the Hegelian usage of animals to expound the idea of harmonious coexistence that animals have with the environment. From Azuma’s perspective, as interpreted by Kitabayashi (53), the Otaku subculture is a composition of individuals who, like animals, only have desires that they seek to gratify immediately. To him, animals stand in contrast to what philosophers call Hegelian humans, whom they characterize as having inter-subjective desires and thus will always demand the presence of other human beings for their well-being.

According to Azuma, as argued by Ito and Okabe (49), Otaku symbolizes the whole episodic and dramatic process of animalization. This process happens because an Otaku eschews all other forms of narratives and meanings and somehow tends to favor those that stimulate the gratification of their desire and so encourage their excitement. To achieve their end, they "decompose the already existing simulacra, only to reassemble them into new ones that provide immediate gratification (Azuma 36). As such Otaku does not generate meanings of their own, but they retain a considerable similarity to sociality to exchange information on the database. From Azuma's argument, there rises an interesting feature of Otaku that with the collapse of grand narratives, Otaku continually offers an interpretation of the same database resulting from a more endless slippage from one simulacrum to another simulacrum or other simulacra (Kitabayashi 51). They do this maybe to reconstruct the meaning of the world to satisfy their passionate desire for the world of fantasy from which they seek satisfaction.
Otaku Culture’s Influence on Contemporary Marketing Trends and Consumer Behavior

In the present discussion of how this new subculture - that is gaining global recognition and following - seeks to use an alternative market, Azuma’s background analysis of Otaku cannot in any instance be swept under the carpet. Comparatively, the contemporary media consumption and the passionate feeling towards the use of media text and fanfictions present a favored argument for the reasons as to why this culture's roots spread this fast (Ito and Okabe 38). This media consumption has an immediate gratification of desire and excitement, characteristics of Otaku. The excessive indulgence of fans to anime, manga, and games, as well as they, passionate desire to participate in the Comic Market, provides a fertile ground for the widespread of the seeds of Otaku (Kitabayashi 65). Culture would be identical to Otaku if the proponents adding to its composition have few similarities, and so they forge their few similarities together to merge an identity. Regarding this, in his analysis of Okada, Kam (165) postulated that Otaku composition has few similarities that in a way are not quickly and distinctly located to make it stand out from other groups. Distinctively, however, this culture was born from a pieced together Japanese culture with the strong influence of technological advancement as well as the prosperous Japanese comic and anime market (Niu, Chiang, and Tsai 727)

Characteristically, the many growing generations associated with Otaku have a unique obsession with the collection and consumption of novelties as well as their compelling purchasing behavior (Azuma 48). The intense desire and obsessive tendency to collect anime, pop culture toys and books regardless of prices mark out Otaku culture from other numerous groups. A study done by Nomura Research Institute in 2005, as quoted by Kitabayashi (43), indicated that the fanatic purchasing behavior of distinctive preferences by Otaku drive mainstream marketing. With their fantastical excitement that Japanese manga, anime, computer games and all the related consumer
electronic devices which mainly target the young growing generation have got a wide following even in the overseas markets (Niu, Chiang, and Tsai 728). It has contributed actively to the wide spreading of Otaku culture. Otaku culture - as noted by many scholars who have studied the peculiarity of this mushrooming culture - has a great fellowship among adolescents and youths since, during their development, the social environment contributes a lot in the cognizance of the social values Kitabayashi (52).

Furthermore, Isaksen and Roper, as quoted in work by Niu, Chiang, and Tsai (162), postulated that marketing and advertising methodology used by direct consumable producers have a likely strong effect on the formation of self-conception and consumer behavior of adolescents. Concurrently, therefore, contemporary media and internet consumption directly and hugely influences the consumer behavior of adolescents. It affirms what the Japanese cultural researcher Okada posited assertion that Otaku was a kind of advanced life form composed of media-savvy individuals endowed with superior sensory faculties.

A study on exploratory purchasing behavior done by Ito and Okabe (23) indicated that the consumers, in most cases, seek excitement more of their sensory needs than physical needs. In other words, the driving force behind their buying behavior favors more the gratification of the visual needs of direct consumers. This emotional impulse suitably fits the adolescents whose consumer behavior includes a disposition to explore and venture into a new experience and novel environments, respectively (Azuma 62). It also explains why Otaku culture has got the better part of the adolescents and youth, or more generally a growing generation.

Additionally, according to Kitabayashi (67), the theory of exploratory buying behavior also includes the ability to take high risks as well as being innovative while making purchases. Again, it provides for the attitude of always seeking the variety, brand switching, information seeking,
purchases based on curiosity fulfillment, as well as communication with more experienced buyers (Kam 173). Quintessentially, therefore, the main congenial to the noted consumption approach among the growing generation is the advanced digital culture, a cult of innovations that are practically popular in Japan as well as the modernized communication and lifestyle patterns in the postmodern societies (Ito and Okabe 54). Typically, Otaku is creative consumers who prefer virtual living to real life, forming cyber-communities that consume a particular product and so share a commonality. The result of such virtual relationships is what (Keliyan 95) call creature of the pure cultures who are more in favor of virtual communities and so tend to shy off the real one. It adds to the reason as to why these youth seek more of an alternative market since they prefer a virtual world to a real one.

The Otaku makes use of their creativity and innovativeness to create new direct consumable products and advance the already existing ones. Consequently, their innovativeness and creativity influence the industrial producers and traders significantly and so alter the marketing trends of specific products with a wide range of preferences among the adolescents and the youths. As such, Otaku's tendency can be designated as 3 C's which according to Ito and Okabe (113) are Collection, Creativity, and Community - which practically is virtual in the strict sense of the word. Accordingly, as observed by Keliyan (98), Otaku stimulates industrial innovation and production while at the same time as a consumer community they create a vibrant market for the very innovations they have created. Through this, there is strongly likely that as the consumer base for these new products enlarge, so is the Otaku culture. It creates an interesting mutual synergy between the existing Otaku and the outside world, which buy these products oblivious to the innovative mind behind the established products.
As noted earlier, the crazy and obsessive consumption of new products driven by the desire to collect more preferred products have made producers always adapt to the ever-evolving needs of the consumers (Kitabayashi 33). As such, the producers tend to study the innovation by Otaku, and then they design and redesign their production accordingly to meet the fluid mass consumers. It leads to what we stated earlier that Otaku contributes majorly to the driving of mainstream marketing and economy of Japan as well as global regions where this culture is having roots (Keliyan 109). Notably, Otaku plays a central economic role as well as maintain, grow and flourish the market that has been around it. Also, Azuma postulated in the writings of Kitabayashi (105) that the ever-shifting consumer behavior of this particular culture has a linkage in their active participation and involvement with other fan communities. It, in a way, has a gradual impact on Otaku's specificity tend to dissolve, and thus Otaku loses its original identity with time.

Like other subcultures, otaku demonstrates a postmodern power relationship between the existing cultures and subcultures, with Otaku strongly influencing and modifying existing cultures or other subcultures (Keliyan 106). It was observed that the large consumption patterns and lifestyles led by the youth’s subculture like Otaku often have an always increasing influence on the large consumer pattern. As such, Otaku consumption style has significant impacts on the Japanese consumer society, so immense that it can admit (Azuma 63). Akihabara district is a good example of how Otaku can influence the already existing culture and market. Akihabara was once popularly known to be a dominating wholesaler and has since become a thriving hub for Otaku culture. It has become a place where individuals with a fanatic obsession with electronic appliances and devices (Ito and Okabe 93) get their consolation and fulfillment. Additionally, the various shops that give attention to Otaku have also risen those handling anime character merchandise and manga fanfictions in particular.
In his paper, Kitabayashi regarded Otaku as enthusiastic consumers after a survey conducted by Nomura Research Institute revealed that Otaku has a market size of 290 billion yen. As an avid consumer, Otaku consumption is mainly driven by their obsessive admiration, sympathy and strong impulse to pursue novelty and ideals (Kitabayashi 167). This consumption behavior creates within an economic world fertile ground for productivity and sale. Besides, as was noted earlier, the passion and creativity that characterize this culture also wheel up to speed productivity bringing up industrial innovation. Marketing strategists must, therefore, be able to adapt to the dynamic demands to constantly produce relevant preferred material for the already existing market with the Otaku culture.

The growing market for Otaku culture has been flourished by the strong pull demonstrated by the lifestyle of the adherents as well as the pull to get associated with Japanese culture. This following creates and widens the already existing Otaku materials as well as their markets (Kam 189). And again, the number of enthusiastic consumers of each significant Otaku field is growing day by day, and this widens the consumer products to meet different consumer preferences.

According to Kitabayashi (27), the major Otaku fields that have since attracted a large following include animation, comics, idols, games and PC assembly. Notably, each of these fields has or creates its audience in the market space offering avenues for alternative markets for Otaku culture (Keliyan 96). For example, the comic market attracts enthusiastic consumers who, apart from reading the published commercial comic magazines and books, also create their own unique secondary products as well as participate in the fanzine. They also contribute by releasing fanfiction based on the characters and storylines, and worldview or opinion seen in the comic productions (Azuma 227). The animation market relies heavily on computer literacy and technology to reach a
more extensive market space. Animation enthusiasts use their creativity to develop animated movies or TV programs for the gratification of fan lovers.

Kam (183) also noted an important point worth cognizance of when he stipulated that since the consumer behavior of Otaku adherents is mainly driven by the obsessive passion for novelty and ideals, the price elasticity that depends on the level of consumption, therefore, declines to the minimum. However, this price elasticity varies within a very short span of time, in the sense that after a decline, the price often rises incredibly to the extreme after a short while. This elasticity makes the adherents use almost all of their disposable resources in the pursuit of collecting the Otaku materials depending on the preference. It is worth noting the creativity and the creative activities of Otaku enthusiastic consumers channeled adequately as symptoms of creative and innovative minds at work (Niu, Chiang, and Tsai 723). Given proper nurturing, the various products developed and the concepts created by Otaku adherents can help achieve industrial innovation. The consumer behavioral pattern reflected by the passion for novelty-driven also contributes a lot to the content industry by that expanding the production industry. However, it must also be observed that the dynamic nature of the demand that needs satisfaction, especially in this always ballooning market space, there is a slight possibility that quality may be compromised in a way. From a commercial perspective, Kitabayashi agreed with Kam in that control measures should be in place to always keep in check the content production and supply. As such, production companies should also review the features of the products and services to see to it that there is no compromise. A compromise in the line of production is a possibility in marketing, as admitted by Ito and Okabe since when there is a high and dynamic, ready market for consumer products, producers will always try to stretch over to satisfy this demand. In the process, a slight compromise on quality may result.

Conclusion
Conclusively, therefore, Otaku is a term used in regards to fan lovers, mainly anime, manga, games, etc. The same word can be used to refer to those who have an obsessive liking for Japanese culture and lifestyle. This particular culture has got a massive global following among adolescents who would prefer a virtual and fictitious kind of lifestyle. As such, the adherents of this subculture are greatly influenced by the significant advancement of technology as well as the fast accessibility of the Internet. Media consumption also contributes greatly to the development of the consumer behavior of this subculture. Notably, the Otaku subculture has an obsessive consumer behavior that creates a huge market for electronic devices and so contributes to the economy of the country where Otaku has got following. Distinctively, the creative nature of the lovers of Otaku also contributes to industrial innovation. This characteristic of change is born mainly from the obsessive desire to collect and own novelty by the lovers of Otaku. Noteworthy, therefore, Otaku is spreading very fast through the various media as so soon it would be consumed globally on a large scale.
Works Cited


