

A Review of Research on the Emotional Tendencies of the Otaku Group

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Abstract

As a youth subculture originating in Japan, otaku culture has formed a large erciyuan audience group in China along with the global spread of the animation, comics, and games industries, and the academic significance of research arising from it has become increasingly prominent. Existing studies still show insufficient systematic investigation of its internal psychological mechanisms, especially emotional tendencies. Taking emotional tendency as the core concept and adopting the literature review method, this study systematically sorts out the conceptual evolution of otaku culture and integrates research findings from psychology, communication studies, and sociology. It analyzes the emotional orientation of the otaku group from multiple levels and finds that otaku culture not only serves as a compensatory satisfaction system for the absence of real-life emotions, but may also aggravate otaku social avoidance and emotional closure through cyclical reinforcement.

Keywords

Otaku, subculture, emotional tendency, psychological mechanism

1. Introduction

As a subculture specific to Japan, otaku culture includes animation, comics, and games that have increasingly become an important content form in the daily consumption of Chinese adolescents. Because hundreds of millions of “erciyuan users” have emerged around it in China, it has had a major influence on a large youth group, and the significance of related academic research has therefore become prominent [1]. The otaku behind otaku culture have experienced sharp criticism from the media and the public after the exposure of the Tsutomu Miyazaki serial murder case in the 1980s, when their public image gradually became negative. Later, they formed a huge socioeconomic consumer group and were re-examined, received the support and encouragement of Japanese conservative forces, and thus formed a relatively stable cultural form [2-3]. However, existing studies mostly focus on macro levels such as otaku consumption behavior and cultural identity, while systematic investigation of their internal psychological mechanisms, especially emotional tendencies, remains insufficient. What kind of emotional world do otaku experience? How are their emotional tendencies formed, expressed, and how do they influence their behavior and identity? Answering these questions concerns not only an accurate understanding of this subcultural group, but also the theoretical grasp of contemporary youth mental health and cultural guidance. Taking emotional tendency as the core concept, this study systematically sorts out the conceptual evolution of otaku culture, integrates existing research findings in psychology, communication studies, and sociology, examines the multidimensional presentation

of the emotional characteristics of the otaku group from different directions, further analyzes the formation mechanism of their emotional tendencies from multiple levels, and finally reviews existing research and looks ahead to future directions, with the aim of providing an integrative theoretical reference for psychological research on otaku.

2. The Concept of Otaku Culture

The term “otaku” originated in Japan and originally referred specifically to adults obsessed with animation and manga [4]. With the development of communication media in recent years, Japanese animation and manga culture has become popular worldwide. Naturally, China’s otaku group has also gradually expanded. However, because of localized adaptation in the communication process, the meaning of “otaku” culture has changed. Before conducting specific research, it is necessary to define the object of the study.

2.1 The Original Japanese Context

Kōjien lists four explanations for the term “otaku (おたく).” The first three have similar meanings, namely “your house,” “your husband,” and “you,” all of which are honorific usages centered on the second person. However, the fourth explanation differs greatly: “otaku” becomes a substitute name for people immersed in a certain hobby, with a meaning equivalent to “enthusiast.” “Otaku group” is extended from this meaning of “enthusiast,” referring to a group that is immersed in and proficient in a certain type of subculture while ordinary people find it difficult to communicate with them [5].

As a youth subculture specific to Japan, otaku culture has evolved into two schools in its development process, and together they have constructed a theoretical framework. One school is “anime realism,” represented by Eiji Otsuka. It holds that otaku are always taciturn and withdrawn, incompatible with mainstream society, and their actions are not accepted by mainstream society. This view more often links the characters in animated works with Japanese social reality, using symbols to reflect reality, and holds that the otaku group can change reality by understanding the narratives behind works. The other school is “game realism,” represented by Hiroki Azuma. In opposition to the former view, it rejects linking the themes of works with social reality. In *Animalizing Postmodernity*, Azuma defines “otaku” as a subculture generally composed of fans of animation, manga, video games, computers, and even science fiction [6]. He argues that most otaku who consume manga and bishoujo games do so out of animal-like habits, and that it is only a kind of neural excitement occurring in people’s brains, related only to images in reality and culture, with no revelation for the real lives of the otaku group. Although the two views differ, their common points can be combined into the main understanding of the otaku group: a subcultural group mainly composed of animation and manga enthusiasts, centered on niche ACGN hobbies, yet not good at communicating with others [7]. Meanwhile, with the passage of time, this group has gained the support and encouragement of Japanese conservative forces because of its rightward ideological tendency, and it has both considerable economic value and potential political influence [2].

2.2 Localized Translation in China

With the development of Japanese animation and manga culture, the otaku culture specific to Japan was also introduced into China. However, it did not directly reproduce the original connotation, but underwent multi-level translation, deviated from the original value narrative, and completed localized transformation.

ACG-based otaku culture did not arise from traditional everyday Chinese life or grow locally. Instead, it was introduced from another country and was accepted, transformed, and developed by Chinese adolescents during continuous cross-cultural communication. The corresponding academic concept also became popular in China. Academic research mainly focuses on three parts, covering Japanese animation and manga and Japanese culture, youth subculture and communication, and adolescent psychology and education. This study extracts the part concerning localized translation from them. He Wei pointed out in related research that the concept of “otaku” first entered mainland China through Hong Kong and Taiwan doujin circles, gradually moved away from the narrow definition in the Japanese context that centered on deep study of ACGN content, active participation in doujin creation, and database consumption, and the derogatory colors originally attached to the concept, such as social alienation and negative prejudice, were gradually dissolved. In the process of mass communication, it was generalized into the labels of “zhainan” and “zhainu,” which refer to reduced

offline social interaction, and finally became deeply bound to the localized derivative concept of “erciyuan,” completing the transformation from a proper term in a niche circle into a popular word used by the whole population [1].

Erciyuan originally referred to the fictional worlds presented by two-dimensional plane media such as animation and manga, in contrast to the three-dimensional space of reality. After being introduced into China, this concept underwent significant localized reconstruction. Its boundaries are broader than those of otaku culture, covering the entire virtual world built by animation, comics, games, and related derivative content. Centered on the virtual space of online media, it emphasizes the separation between the two-dimensional world and the three-dimensional world, while also pointing to specific media content and aesthetic space. Its audience range is broader, and in the process of localization in China it has undergone a transformation of destigmatization and mainstreaming. Erciyuan culture originates from Japanese otaku culture and can be regarded as a Chinese-style entity and extension of Japanese otaku culture, while otaku are the core consumer and producer group of erciyuan culture. Understanding this distinction helps avoid confusing the two in academic research and accurately grasp the object boundary of research on the psychological mechanisms of otaku.

3. Multidimensional Presentation of the Emotional Characteristics of the Otaku Group

The emotional tendency of the otaku group is a complex issue with multiple dimensions. Existing studies have revealed many characteristics of otaku in emotional experience, emotional expression, and emotional satisfaction from different perspectives. In general, these emotional characteristics can be roughly summarized into three interrelated dimensions. From these different angles, the emotional manifestations of the otaku group can be understood.

3.1 Loneliness and Social Avoidance

Otaku are a subcultural group created by Japan’s ACG industry, giving society a stereotyped impression of autism, introversion, and low social adaptability [8]. Although this impression has a certain stigmatizing color, it also reflects to some extent certain real aspects of the otaku group’s emotional experience, mainly originating from the significant characteristics that otaku show in interpersonal communication. At the level of the relationship between media and subculture, scholars believe that the Internet and new media have provided new platforms for the development of otaku culture. At the same time, otaku over-reliance on online communication has significantly weakened their ability to communicate face to face in reality [9].

From the perspective of empirical research, one study provided precise empirical evidence from the perspective of personality psychology. The study randomly sampled 200 college students, used the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) to measure their personality traits, and examined the relationship between college students’ otaku behavior and personality traits through Pearson bivariate correlation analysis. The results showed that college student otaku reported phenomena such as becoming introverted and depressed in character and being poor at interacting with others [10]. Another study conducted a systematic empirical investigation of the lifestyle of college student otaku from an interdisciplinary perspective of sociology and psychology. It found that otaku college students generally had problems of avoiding interpersonal relationships and having a low degree of harmony in getting along with society. This finding indicates that otaku show an obvious withdrawal tendency at the level of interpersonal communication. They do not lack social ability, but choose to avoid face-to-face social interaction because of subjective willingness or psychological state [11]. Integrating the above two empirical studies, it can be found that when the real world cannot provide sufficient emotional support and social satisfaction, otaku turn their emotional needs toward the virtual world, seeking alternative emotional satisfaction through emotional investment in virtual characters and deep participation in erciyuan communities. Although this alleviates loneliness to some extent, it also causes regression in social ability in reality.

3.2 Belonging and Emotional Identification

A sense of belonging is an important positive appeal in the emotional world of the otaku group. The reason why otaku culture can attract and maintain a large audience lies to a great extent in the fact that it provides individuals who feel alienated in real society with a space where emotions can be placed. At the level of identity,

qualitative research combining in-depth interviews and online ethnography explored from a micro perspective the construction process of otaku identity in the Internet environment. It found that otaku are more inclined to regard animation and manga as a living habit and have a strong erciyuan tendency. They construct their own erciyuan world on the Internet and believe that there is a more real self and personality display in the erciyuan world. They express their emotional identification with animation and manga by forming communities or posting online. This emotional resonance is reflected, on the one hand, in positive plots that value companions, persist in dreams, live optimistically, and endure with strength; on the other hand, it is also reflected in plots marked by youthful sadness and aestheticized love. This part of cognitive and emotional identification also leads to behavioral identification among otaku [9].

The consumption behavior and value concepts of groups in otaku communities have important reference value for individuals and produce important effects on members' psychology and behavior. Consumption information and consumption behavior within the community stimulate individuals' senses and psychology to a certain extent, prompting them to continuously imitate and pursue the actions of others, and thus bringing about changes and convergence in group consumption behavior [12]. The main consideration of the otaku group for animation and manga products lies in emotional identification. As a special consumer group, their main mode of consumption is emotional experience. They pay more attention to obtaining psychological and spiritual satisfaction through consumption of product objects, while their requirement for product practicality is not obvious, and their consumption psychology has obvious emotional characteristics. Emotional identification is the key here. Otaku are not merely consuming commodities, but consuming a kind of emotional belonging. The cultural symbols, discourse systems, and value concepts shared inside otaku communities constitute the basis of emotional connection among group members.

3.3 Emotional Healing and Compensatory Satisfaction

Otaku culture not only provides otaku with a sense of belonging, but also serves to a great extent as a mechanism of emotional healing and compensatory satisfaction. For individuals bearing multiple pressures in real life, the characters, stories, and communities in otaku culture constitute a safe harbor where they can temporarily escape reality and obtain emotional comfort. By immersing themselves in the virtual world constructed by media, otaku obtain emotional satisfaction that is difficult to obtain in the real world. Immersion in the virtual world is not only a way for them to contact and understand the external world, but also becomes a way for them to escape reality [13]. Through a motivation study taking the Nanjing area as an example, it can be found that young otaku indeed has high exposure to ACG in order to satisfy certain needs, among which the need to "escape pressure" is the strongest [14]. From a more macro social-psychological level, the existence of otaku is not a problem of psychopathology or family psychology. It is deeply rooted in the empty situation under social affluence, and everyone is looking for a way to adjust to social pressure. Interpersonal communication in the virtual world has no relationship of interest, and everyone can seek psychological compensation that cannot be realized in reality from animation, comics, or games. The prosperity of otaku culture reflects the deep psychological needs of specific social groups. This psychological need can be understood to a great extent as a desire for emotional security, emotional companionship, and emotional confirmation. When real society cannot fully satisfy these needs, otaku culture becomes an alternative emotional supply system [15].

Participation in otaku culture is not only a channel of emotional compensation, but also a way for individuals to conduct self-expression and value construction. Adolescents' emotional investment in "moe" is not simple consumption. Rather, it is a key practice through which they internalize emotional values such as "a sense of security, companionship, and healing" and seek circle identity. The strength of this mechanism lies in its deep combination of aesthetic infectiousness, the mediatized power of the digital-intelligent era, and the symbolic logic of consumer society. Its emotional shaping follows an implicit and materialized process of "from sensory attraction to emotional resonance, further to role identification, then to symbolic consumption, and finally to community consolidation." This path shows that emotional experience in otaku culture is not a static movement from consumption to satisfaction, but a dynamic and constructive process [16].

4. Formation Mechanism of the Emotional Tendencies of the Otaku Group

The formation of the emotional tendencies of the otaku group is not the result of a single factor, but the product of the intertwined action of three forces: social structural factors, media technology factors, and individual psychological dynamic factors. Existing studies have revealed this complex mechanism from different dimensions and provided multidimensional theoretical explanations for understanding why otaku are as they are.

4.1 Social Structural Factors

The formation of otaku emotional tendencies first cannot be separated from the social structural context in which they are located. As a subcultural group, otaku have long been given many negative labels in mainstream social discourse. This stereotype is not neutral social cognition, but a stigmatization process with substantive influence. When society repeatedly identifies a group as abnormal, group members may internalize this external evaluation as part of their self-cognition. The influence of stigmatization is multifaceted. It constitutes the cultural gap between otaku and mainstream society. In the current process of cultural alternation, misunderstanding and conflict arise between subculture and mainstream culture because of the difference in accumulated codes of the times [17], which causes otaku to face more obstacles to understanding and exclusion in real social interaction. At the same time, stigmatization also lowers otaku self-worth and causes them to identify more with the otaku lifestyle. From a more macro perspective, youth groups have greater enthusiasm for social change because of their own characteristics, making them more likely to accept, understand, and even create new cultures and new things. However, in this rapid change, new social contradictions and value conflicts, the rise of ugly social phenomena, and the absence of social control mechanisms make a considerable number of young people unable to adapt, resulting in states such as behavioral disorder, rebellion, and moral anomie. Their identification with society declines, their trust in others decreases, and they even no longer feel secure in the family. Therefore, they prefer to seek an isolated space of their own and satisfy the self in the virtual world [18]. In order to escape reality, they find that in the otaku group, compared with the real world, each member can be accepted, recognized, and respected to a greater extent. Here, they can completely create a brand-new role through their own efforts. In this sense, the otaku group seems to have constructed an ideal “utopia.” [19]

4.2 Psychological Dynamic Factors

If social structural factors and media technology factors constitute the external conditions for the formation of otaku emotional tendencies, then psychological dynamic factors are their internal driving force. The reason why otaku choose to immerse themselves in otaku culture rather than other subcultures or other emotional coping methods is closely related to their deep psychological needs.

An analysis of the attraction of otaku culture from the perspective of social psychology shows that otaku groups who have long been immersed in the virtual world feel especially bitter when returning to the real world. The contradiction between the virtual world and reality creates continuous psychological pressure, causing them to show withdrawal and self-closure in real events, then rely more on the Internet, and finally escape everything in reality, completely using the virtual world of animation and manga to satisfy their own psychological needs [15]. These specific groups cannot obtain satisfaction in real society, so they place their spiritual sustenance on the sense of belonging brought by the virtual world. From the psychological mechanism of inferiority and compensation, otaku culture provides a unique compensation path for individuals with inferiority tendencies. Adler's individual psychology points out that inferiority is a psychological state that exists universally among human beings. It originates from an individual's cognition of personal limitations, and individuals cope with inferiority through compensation mechanisms [20]. Specifically, individuals who feel inadequate in one field seek excellence in another field as compensation. Otaku culture precisely provides individuals who feel inferior in real society with a field in which compensation is possible. Individuals who lack social ability and emotional support in real life can obtain a sense of achievement and identity in the virtual world through deep understanding of characters, professional interpretation of works, and active participation in communities. This compensation is effective in the short term, and it can indeed relieve individuals' inferiority and emotional loneliness. However, in the long run, excessive reliance on compensation from the virtual world may further weaken individuals' adaptive ability in real society and form a self-reinforcing cycle. It should be noted that the otaku group's obsession with otaku culture may also be affected

by value nihilism and cynicism, which will lead otaku to excessive neglect of reality and have adverse effects on social development [21].

4.3 Media Technology Factors

Social structural factors constitute the push force in the formation of otaku emotional tendencies, pushing them away from real social relationships, while media technology factors constitute the pull force, drawing their emotions and attention toward the virtual world. Studies have found that, to some extent, otaku all suffer from “media dependency” in communication studies. Individuals invest large amounts of time, energy, and emotion in the virtual world constructed by media, so that interpersonal relationships and social participation in the real world are seriously weakened. This concept precisely captures the media dimension in the formation process of otaku emotional tendencies: otaku do not naturally possess specific emotional tendencies, but gradually form emotional dependence on the virtual world in the process of long-term and high-intensity media use [22]. It should be noted that the influence of media technology on otaku emotional tendencies is not one-way. Online virtual space provides new relationships and fields for the discovery and construction of the self. In the process of online interaction, individuals can repackage and redefine themselves, reconstruct their virtual identities by using the skills and resources they possess, and at the same time seek self-construction in interaction with others. Otaku online interaction has its interactive emotions in the process of symbolic interaction, and such emotions include identity emotions and consumption emotions [23]. This means that media are not only tools of emotional compensation, but also spaces of emotional production and emotional identification. The emotions experienced by otaku in the virtual world are not simple copies or substitutes of real emotions, but are reproduced and constructed in the media environment.

5. Conclusion

Reviewing the academic course of research on the emotional tendencies of the otaku group, it can be seen that existing studies have made valuable contributions at multiple levels. First, research has moved from phenomenon description to mechanism explanation. Early studies of otaku were mostly based on phenomenon description and focused on the external presentation of otaku behavioral characteristics and lifestyle. Second, there has been interdisciplinary integration of multiple perspectives. Research on otaku involves communication studies, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and other disciplines. The introduction of this multidisciplinary perspective has made the understanding of otaku emotional tendencies no longer confined to a single theoretical framework. Third, there has been a preliminary revelation of the emotional world of otaku. Existing studies have presented to some extent the multidimensional appearance of otaku emotional tendencies, and these findings have laid an important empirical foundation for follow-up research.

Although existing research has made the above progress, objectively speaking, research on the emotional tendencies of the otaku group is still in its initial stage and has several prominent deficiencies. The first problem is that most studies still remain at the level of reviewing the social phenomena of the otaku group and lack large-scale quantitative investigation. In the research process, otaku are roughly treated as a homogeneous whole for investigation, and there is a lack of careful distinction between emotional differences among different types and different degrees of otaku. Internal differences are ignored, and there may be overgeneralized conclusions. Second, there is no in-depth research on the fact that Chinese otaku culture has its own unique social context and evolutionary path, and there is a lack of support from local theory, making it difficult for research to grasp deeply the unique logic of the emotional tendencies of Chinese otaku. Finally, research on the dynamic evolution process of emotional tendencies is insufficient, and there is a lack of tracking investigation of diachronic changes in otaku emotional tendencies. From entering otaku culture to immersion and then to possible exit from otaku culture, how do individuals' emotional tendencies change? Is the influence of participation in otaku culture on emotion cumulative or staged? These questions currently have no specific research.

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