

## Identity Construction of Otaku and Weeaboo through Manga and Anime

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### ABSTRACT

Manga and Anime are known as the most famous Japanese works among their fans, otaku and weeaboo. Nowadays, it is easier to access manga and anime through the internet, and these works can influence otakus and weeaboos' identity construction. This research is written to know the characteristics of otaku and weeaboo, the reasons why they identify themselves as otaku and weeaboo, and what method that otaku and weeaboo use to construct their virtual identity. This thesis uses a method of qualitative research and gathers all data by interviewing four informants with structured questions. Social identity by Henri Tajfel and identity theory in the virtual world by B. Coleman are used to connect the data from informants with the analysis. Through the theory application, there are some discoveries which relate to otaku and weeaboo. They have two main characteristics as information-fetishists and being obsessed with having merchandise which relate to manga and anime. Furthermore, the reasons otaku and weeaboo construct their virtual identity are improving themselves in the real world by exploring manga and anime characters and creating an ideal world in a virtual world for sharing the same obsession with each other. Moreover, otaku and weeaboo create avatars and memes as a way to show their constructed virtual identity and develop their talents.

**Keywords:** manga and anime, identity construction, otaku and weeaboo, information-fetishist, virtual

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Manga is one of two most important works that became the main industry in Japan, specialized for art. According to Hsiao-ping Chen (2006), "story manga are usually printed in dichromatic (e.g., black and white) tones and focus on pictorial images rather than text, depicting in particular feelings and emotions through sequential movement" (page. 1). Based on Hsiao-ping Chen's statement, those funny pictures are made to attract people to read a lot of manga because it invites people's curiosity about the stories, which have many complicated conflicts. Manga also has diverse types of genres for all readers who want to read. Next, the origin of manga began when the oldest literature existed since the Tokugawa era in Japan. Following the book from Robin E. Brenner (2007) entitled *Understanding Manga and Anime*:

Artist Hokusai Katsuhika (1760–1849) coined the term "manga." Hokusai is responsible for one of the most famous images of Japanese art, the brilliant and precise woodblock print known as *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*". He also called manga, meaning whimsical pictures or sketches (p. 3).



Based on this quote, Brenner explains that Hokusai was a grandmaster who mastered all arts especially in creating traditional Japanese traditional works. The idea to make picture or painting *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* on the block mold becomes an inspiration for the creators of the next generation to learn Hokusai's drawing technique. Moreover, manga is Hokusai's drawing technique which he created in sketch form, and it showed some strange scenes and figures as seen from the picture above, so it is difficult to know the meaning behind

that painting. However, the arrangement in Hokusai's painting became the pioneer of modern manga.

Besides being able to write and draw manga, Japanese Comics sometimes can get their anime adaptations. According to Susan Napier (2001) in her book entitled *Anime: from Akira to Princess Mononoke; Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, anime is defined as "a medium in which distinctive visual elements combine with an array of generic, thematic, and philosophical structures to produce a unique aesthetic world" (p. 10). From Susan's statement, Anime is a medium that developed more in visualization to attract many viewers with its complex elements which show the aesthetic aspect of beautiful colors in artworks. Moreover, the world of aesthetics based on the earlier quote means that Anime contains many complex storylines such as tragic, very sexual romance, and the addition of comedy in order to attract more people to watch these shows. Furthermore, Manga was adapted into anime for a special reason, which is spreading the culture to create worldwide appeal, especially for young audiences such as teenagers and adults.

Otaku is the first or basic term translated into English as a 'nerd'. This term began to appear in 1980 and was used by amateur Manga artists and most fans to refer to the otaku as strange people (henjin). Moreover, in *Adult Manga: Culture & Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* which is a book written by Sharon Kinsella (2000), he further explains the definition of otaku as "the original meaning of otaku is 'your home' and by association, 'you', 'yours' and 'home'" (p. 128). The meaning of the context of 'home' from otaku is a negative reference from someone who is not used to social life such as close friendships and he or she tends to communicate through online media in order to maintain a safe distance from other people. Next, weeaboo is a common term besides otaku that has become part of the Manga and Anime subculture. Regarding the term about weeaboo, Lacuesta explained it in his research entitled *The Weeaboo Subculture: Identification and Performance* which said that "the term weeaboo has also been noted to be used consecutively with wapanese, which stands for *Wannabe Japanese*" (Lacuesta, 2020, p.6). The meaning of 'wapanese' is similar to 'weeaboo', but the term 'weeaboo' is better known in the community than 'wapanese'. In addition, many people become otaku and weeaboo in various countries in our world due to high consumption of manga and anime, with endless production of these Japanese artworks by manga writers and animation studios.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this thesis, I will analyze the identity construction of otaku and weeaboo through manga and anime by collecting data from four informants. Therefore, I will use two theories that related to the topic of my thesis. These theories are social identity and identity in the virtual world.

### **2.1 Social Identity**

The characteristics of otaku and weeaboo cannot be separated from social identity because both are also the members of a community or social group. Regarding this social identity, Henri Tajfel as the originator of this theory states in a book entitled *The Sage Handbook of Identity* by Mohanty and Wetherell that "there is an aspect of 'social identity' that needs to be understood. A person's social identities speak in a fundamental way to who they are in the world" (in Mohanty dan Wetherell, 2010, p. 48). According to this statement, it has a meaning that social identity becomes the basis for everyone to define their individual identity. Interacting with other people in a particular social group can help that person to identify his or her social influence in the society. Moreover, individual identity is always related to social identity and the process of forming that identity in interaction with other members of the social community. However, Tajfel also stated that "[n]or is individual identity somehow more 'real' and more important to the subject than social identity. As we know all too well, people can love, hate, kill or even die for their group" (Mohanty dan Wetherell, p. 48, 2010), which means that social identity is much

more important and real for a person than individual identity. The effect of social identity is so strong until a person or individual even dares to die for his social group. Furthermore, Volker Grassmuck (1990) added another characteristic of otaku, namely otaku tends to be an information-fetishists. Grassmuck's opinion can be seen in the following quote:

'Information-fetishism' is a central term for Yamazaki. Children are taught to take in the world as data and information, in a fragmentary way, not systematically. Otaku continues the same pattern of information acquisition and reproduction that he has learned at school. Only the subject matter has changed: idols, cameras or rock 'n' roll. But content has become negligible anyway (p. 7).

Furthermore, the main keyword from Grassmuck's quote is 'information-fetishism', which means that humans are taught from childhood to understand the world as data or information in fragmented or incomplete ways.

## 2.2 Identity in Virtual World

Identity is the result of construction that is built both in the real world or virtual world. In this section I will focus on discussing the construction of identity in the virtual world. According to Simon Evans (2011) in his article entitled *The Self and Second Life: A Case Study Exploring the Emergence of Virtual Selves*, one of the purposes why people construct their identities through virtual media to “enable them to improve their physical world self by exploring new attitudes and behaviors or learning new skill” (p. 48). In other words, according to Simon Evans, the purpose of people creating their virtual identity is exploring many new things such as positive attitudes and behaviors including skills that can be learned so that everyone can prepare themselves to improve their abilities in the real world. Furthermore, Simon Evans said that the purpose of people to construct identity in the virtual world is revealing their true identity that cannot be expressed in the real world. This opinion can be seen in Simon Evans' statement as follows: “others indicate that who they are in Second Life is a representation of who they are ‘inside’, their ‘real self’ which they feel they cannot reveal in the physical world” (p. 52-53). Some people want to do activities in the virtual world to represent their 'real' self, where this 'real self-nature' has never been shown in real life. Moreover, in Coleman's book entitled *Hello Avatar: Rise of Networked Generation* stated that avatar is “computer-generated figure controlled by a person via a computer” (p. 12), where avatar is a figure that created through a computer program and controlled by an individual as the user to explore the virtual world. Coleman further said that the purpose of people create avatars is “build the world you want and share it with other” (p. 21). From this quote, it indicates that some people have the intention of creating avatars to build a new virtual world as an online community.

## 3. DATA ANALYSIS OF MANGA AND ANIME FANS

In this chapter, I will analyze the characteristics and virtual identities of people who like Japanese works such as manga and anime. These people are usually referred to as otaku and weeb, the fans of manga and anime. Next, I will analyze the reasons why manga and anime fans identify themselves as otaku and weeb. Third, I will analyze how manga and anime fans construct their identities as otaku and weeb. Moreover, in order to analyze the thesis topic related to this identity construction, I collected data from four diverse sources but have similarities in liking various manga and anime works.

### 3.1 Characteristics of Otaku and Weeb

This first part will discuss the two main characteristics of otaku and weeb, known as information-fetishists and obsessive fans. Information-fetishists characteristics are shown through Informants 1, 2, and 4. While the obsessive otaku and weeb characteristics are shown by Informants 1 and 2. I will show the extent of their characteristics as information-fetishists about the knowledge about manga and anime in terms of differences in production, visuals, characters, plots, and anime adaptations of the manga.

### **3.1.1 Otaku and Weeaboo as Information-Fetishist**

In this subchapter, finding the characteristics of manga and anime fans is very important and they can help to know the process of identity construction that is carried out by those Informants. This construction occurred because they have been consuming manga and anime since childhood, where at that time these two Japanese works were becoming a trend with many manga being sold in bookstores and several anime being broadcast through local television stations in Indonesia. Furthermore, the information-fetishist characteristics of otaku and weeaboo can be clearly seen through the copyright license of manga and anime work. The licensing process for manga and anime is carried out through three types of stages in the censorship field, writer and voice actor, and work title. From these three licensing stages, there are two types of characteristics born of this fragmentary information which are careful and analytical.

Licensing has a strong relation with manga and anime works in the censorship area. Manga is a work of Japanese comics that is often subject to licensing because the censorship stage is part of the translation or localization process from Japanese to Indonesian. An example of censorship can be seen from Informant 1's statement through *Gintama* manga's quote in Indonesia such as "kamu seharusnya menunjukkan payudaramu, dasar bodoh!" (Informant 1). Based on the example of the translation from Informant 1, there are several words that contain meanings or meanings that are inappropriate for consumption by readers, especially for children. 'Payudara' (female body parts forbidden to touch) and 'bodoh' (swear words) are two forbidden words spoken by underage readers because they can influence their behavior to talk about negative things unconsciously to other people. This example can be the evidence that Informant 1 has a sufficient detailed knowledge of the main topics of manga and anime with the licensing process and censorship system as fragmentary information. This also causes Informant 1 to be very careful about consuming licensed manga because many translations are either indecent or dirty to read.

Furthermore, the characteristics of 'information-fetishism' give birth to analytical traits as a manifestation of the obsession about very detailed information. The characteristic of 'information-fetishism' which shows this analytical characteristic can be seen from the title of manga and anime works. Data from Informant 4 reveals the reasons behind writing long or short titles by manga and anime creators. Moreover, Informant 4 stated that "short titles can cause confusion for readers and long titles can become clickbait for entertainment" (Informant 4). Fragmentally, this explains that manga and anime short titles are rarely found in bookstores and broadcast on television. Because currently short titles of manga and anime have been replaced by long titles in the hope that many otakus and weeaboos will be more interested in consuming both types of works.

### **3.1.2 Characteristic Otaku and Weeaboo as Obsessive Fans**

Related to this subchapter, the obsessions owned by otaku and weeaboo can be shown through the examples given by Informant 1 and Informant 2. Based on the data from the results of their interviews, I found that the obsessions of otaku and wibu are shown in detail from the various merchandise collections that they had. Informant 1's obsession with manga and anime is proven by the example from his statement "I'm having a hard time finding Katsura Hinagiku prize figure because it is an old stuff so that they can only sold in Japan and only existed in 2012 looking on the internet takes 1 to 2 years through sales websites with 40 sites in total" (Informant 1). According to this quote, I found that otaku and weeaboo with obsessive characteristics are described to have a strong determination for achieving their goals. The search for this merchandise becomes a hard-work effort that proves otaku and weeaboos are unstoppable to search for manga and anime that they really like with this obsessive characteristic.

As for Informant 2, he gave an example as the proof of his manga and anime obsession through action figures merchandise called nendoroid (small figures). The example of this obsession was stated by Informant 2 as he stated, "I had a hard time getting the merchandise because it was rare because I had to order early (pre-order) first so that the merchandise would be produced immediately, and I got an auction from Japan directly from Japan for 1,700,000" (Informant 2). From this statement by Informant 2, he explained the reason why there are many rare stuff because some merchandise producers collect data in advance by using the pre-order method (ordering early) for potential buyers, such as otaku and weeaboo to choose one famous manga and anime character who will be made into a nendoroid-like figure. Then, one nendoroid figure alone costs 1,700,000 rupiah, which proves that otaku and weeaboo are willing to spend a lot of money just to fulfill their obsessive need toward manga and anime works.

### **3.2 The Reasons for Manga and Anime Fans to Identify Themselves as Otaku and Weeaboo**

Otaku and weeaboo can construct their identities by understanding and studying the traits, behaviors, and abilities (skills) possessed by each of their characters from manga and anime. There are two groups of favorite characters from manga and anime that help to improve the quality of otaku and weeaboo, such as characters who never give up and characters who develop themselves with various abilities.

#### **3.2.1 Becoming a Person who Never Give Up**

In this subchapter, I will discuss some characters who become the inspiration for all informants. Immediately continued on Informant 1, the characteristics of manga and anime characters can provide very useful inspiration for him. Informant 1 stated that "the inspiration I get from my favorite characters is that they have unique traits, but I don't have" (Informant 1). The purpose of this opinion is that Informant 1 felt very touched after seeing the tough struggles experienced by his three favorite characters over and over and lived with a positive attitude without stopping. Besides telling strengths as inspiration that fills the weaknesses, Informant 1 also stated that "the characters from Japanese works can affect my personality. A simple example such as solving a problem" (Informant 1). Based on the opinion of Informant 1 before, he explicitly said that every problem can be a stepping stone in life and that all problems cannot be run away, they are important, even though they cannot be faced.

Furthermore, another goal that can be learned from this unyielding personality is pursuing a dream to do something that otaku and weeaboo really like. The example can be shown through the favorite manga and anime characters by Informant 3 like Asta and Hinata. Regarding these two-dimensional characters, Informant 3 revealed their personalities in detail such as "Asta is not sad even though he has no talent, but there is still a passion to find alternative ways to achieve his dreams. Likewise, Hinata who has no talent, but still likes to play volleyball for her own pleasure" (Informant 3). This quote proves the characteristics of the personalities of the protagonists who always have big dreams as the main goal to be achieved. I also found that the results of Asta and Hinata's exploration of personality gave a lesson for Informant 3 to never give up on realizing their dreams despite his weaknesses.

#### **3.2.2 Exploration of Self-Development**

In addition to the unyielding personality, generally every famous manga and anime character is expertise and clever with diverse knowledge. This cleverness makes the manga and anime characters in question look perfect in the sense that they make minimal mistakes when using their talents to conduct certain activities. Moreover, this matter is related to Informant 1 and Informant 4 that have favorite characters who are very good at several subjects. Starting from Informant 1, he revealed Katsura's personality as a person who is "smart, strong in martial arts, athletic, and hardworking" (Informant 1). From the quote stated by Informant 1 earlier, this

proves that Informant 1 wants to improve his skills like Katsura who has various talents in resolving conflicts or obstacles.

Next, Informant 4 reveals Keaton's personality as a character who "continues to learn even though he already has many talents to adapt in all conditions" (Informant 4). The manga and anime character named Keaton is described as an individual who has many talents in the fields of zoologist, archaeologist, soldier, and investigator. Moreover, based on quotes from the two previous informants, both Informant 1 and Informant 4 are motivated to learn various kinds of new talents or skills that can be used as provisions to improve their abilities in the real world. In addition, the new skills can be useful for increasing the identities attractiveness of Informant 1 and Informant 4 as otaku or weeaboo who have many skills, as well as being the materials for constructing a second identity in the virtual world.

### **3.2.3 Creating an Ideal World**

Another goal of everyone to construct their identity as otaku and weeaboo is creating a special ideal world for themselves. Based on the data which was obtained from Informant 1, the main goal of otaku and weeaboo to construct their identity can be done by sharing something they like with fellow otaku and weeaboo. In addition, from the data of Informant 1, he stated that "chatting about various genres of manga and anime works and sharing impressions after consuming these two types of Japanese works can be considered as a social gathering" (Informant 1). This is evidence that shows that otaku and weeaboo have strong intention to create a virtual world as a new place or container for them to share with each other as the purpose is constructing virtual identities in the social sphere according to the size of the otaku and weeaboo communities.

As for Informant 3, otaku and weeaboo have a goal to find as many as possible and make new friends with the same identity as otaku and weeaboo to construct their virtual identity in cyberspace. Informant 3 revealed the reason for this goal "because if we can't find people who have similarities in the identities of these otaku and weeaboo, then all the contents of the conversation about manga and anime will become irrelevant" (Informant 3). It means that the important thing to note from this data is the 'common identity'. Informant 3 emphasizes that to find other people with the same identity, each individual needs to create a new space specifically for otaku and weeaboo in the virtual world.

### **3.3 Two Ways to Construct the Identity of Otaku and Weeaboo**

In this section, there are two ways to construct otaku and weeaboo's identities, like creating avatars and memes. The reason people create avatars is developing themselves in the virtual world and what things that they can learn when interacting with other people's avatars, for example do social gathering in otaku and weeaboo community through virtual way. Furthermore, making memes is also one way to construct virtual identities by spreading them to all members of the otaku and wibu communities.

#### **3.3.1 The Creation of Avatar**

Virtual world is a place to create an avatar which becomes a way to construct identity. Related to this matter, Coleman (2011) expressed his opinion "we see personality in almost everything, which helps to explain the power of avatars as representatives of self" (p. 70), which means that the avatar is a representation of the original self-identity from every individual. This representation can come from various things such as manga and anime, which can be a source of creating a virtual identity for an individual who has otaku as the identity. In addition, the construction of virtual identities through avatars also aims to reveal the individual's true identity that cannot be shown in the real world, where this was discussed by Simon Evans who said that

“[o]thers indicate that that who they are in Second Life is a representation of who they are ‘inside’, their ‘real self’ which they feel they cannot reveal in the physical world” (pp. 52-53). This quote emphasizes that people who live their second lives in virtual spaces intend to show their ‘real’ self-representation and develop their personality freely without being hindered by various social norms that exist in society.

Starting from Informant 2, he gave an example about his avatar identity through online or virtual media that he can communicate smoothly with other people, while he is a person who stutters and is embarrassed to talk to others in reality. The example given by Informant 2 is about “talking a lot to other people via online, whereas in the real world I am stuttering my mouth (do not dare talk to people)” (Informant 2). Then, this example is following Simon Evans' opinion that Informant 2 as an individual intends to live a second life in the virtual world to show his 'real' self to be able to speak fluently with other people. Moreover, related to the construction of this virtual identity, Informant 3 stated that each individual has another identity which is only shown through virtual media. As evidence, he gave a statement that “virtual identity is something that someone wants to show regardless of when he wants to show it in the real world and virtual world” (Informant 3). This quote can be proven by the example of an individual whose existence wants to look like a worker, but he explores the virtual world with his status as an otaku and a weasel. Informant 3 explained that the 'something' meant someone who really wanted to show his or her identity to all other avatar users by using his or her own avatar.

### 3.3.2 The Creation of Memes



Constructing a virtual identity can be done by creating a meme, where this term has dominated the virtual world, especially in the online community. Then, based on the journal of Carlos Mauricio Castaño Díaz (2011) entitled Defining and characterizing the concept of Internet Meme, he defines memes as follows:

Some examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. So, memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (p. 84).

Based on this quote, memes are created from various forms such as a collection of ideas, tones, fashions of dresses, and how to make pots and build arches. Various ideas to create this meme are always shared from one individual's brain to another without stopping, so that the channeling process of creative ideas can also be called as creating an imitation of the original work like manga and anime.

Furthermore, the picture above is the example of a meme which was given by Informant 2 as a proof of virtual identity construction on the environment around otaku and weebos. The meme scene in the image above is taken from the anime called *Jojo Bizarre Adventure*, where the original scene was supposed to show the preparations between the man in yellow clothes and the man in blue clothes to battle. From this meme example, Informant 2 revealed that “memes are shown with the aim of sharing fun and laughing together. Then the creation of this meme

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includes a way to express the virtual identity of otaku and weeaboo” (Informant 2). The statement expressed by Informant 2 is proof that by spreading memes in virtual communities, otaku and weeaboo indirectly construct virtual identities by channeling their creative ideas related to the comedy genre, so that they are considered as humorous people by the others (common people).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The conclusion that I can draw from the results of this thesis is that otaku and weeaboo have the main characteristics like information-fetishism, which means someone who sees the world as data in fragmentary information. By collecting data from the interviews of the four informants, there are findings that show that otaku and weeaboo’s characteristics as someone who can see in detail all kinds of information related to their hobbies, such as manga and anime. Moreover, constructing this virtual identity has two goals, like exploring new things from favorite characters and creating an ideal world. All individuals with otaku and weeaboo identities have favorite characters that are found in reading manga and anime shows. Each character that appears in manga and anime has their own unique personality. By consuming these manga and anime intensely, all informants can learn some new things, such as positive attitudes and behaviors from all manga and anime characters and have skills to improve their abilities in the real world. Furthermore, creating an avatar is one way to construct a virtual identity. The source of this representation can come from anywhere, including manga and anime characters favored by otaku or weeaboo. By creating an avatar, otaku or weeaboo can show their true representation or identity to community members through the virtual world. How to construct a virtual identity can be done through the creation of memes, some of which have comedy or humor. The purpose of the creation this meme is to establish friendships as a sign that otaku or weeaboo are more concerned with social identity, and they do this in order to jointly construct a virtual identity as a humorous person.

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