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Cybercultures from the East: Japanese Rock Music Fans in North America

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**A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
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Abstract

This is a study of Japanese rock music, or J-rock, fans in North America. Fans rely heavily on the Internet to access music files and official merchandise and to interact with other J-rock fans through virtual communities. It is in part because of the Internet fan community that there have been J-rock musicians who come to North America to perform live concerts and hold promotional events at Japanese animation conventions. By studying the J-rock fan community, we can be able to better understand how new subcultures emerge from an interest in media that originated in a different cultural context, the role of the Internet in creating 'imagined communities' in which people are connected by common hobbies and interests, how fans create an 'imagined Japan' based on interpretation and consumption of J-rock, and the consequences participation in the J-rock fan community has on formations of self-identity and future goals and desires.

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Introduction

The spread of Japanese rock music, or J-rock, in North America has been heavily tied with the development of computer technology and the Internet. J-rock fans rely heavily on the Internet to access music files and official merchandise and to interact with other J-rock fans through virtual communities. It is arguable that, without the Internet, the J-rock community may not exist as it does today. The widespread availability of the Internet has allowed J-rock to become accessible to people located outside of metropolitan areas, resulting in a fan culture in which its participants are geographically scattered throughout North America and other countries. Until five years ago, the circulation of J-rock media was unconnected to any corporate structure in North America and was primarily being promoted by fans who shared music and information with potential fans through unofficial venues using the Internet. It is in part because of the substantial growth of J-rock fan culture in recent years that there have been J-rock musicians who come to North America to perform live concerts and hold promotional events at Japanese animation conventions. This development in which North American promoters and businesses have become interested in marketing J-rock to a wider audience marks a transition period in which the distribution of J-rock media and bands is becoming formalized and mass-marketed.

In this thesis, I look at North-American Japanese rock music, or J-rock, fan culture as an 'imagined community' in which people feel a connection with others despite not knowing everyone who is a part of the group. I argue that this is an 'imagined community' because there is no one single J-rock virtual community. Easy access to information and media related to J-rock in recent years has led to the splintering of what had been considered a close-knit community into smaller, separate communities that are focused on specific bands or subgenres of J-rock. Yet despite

the fact that they participate in hundreds of different virtual communities on the Internet, J-rock fans insist that they are part of one large 'community' that connects them all in an imaginary bond. Through social interaction with others, J-rock fans are able to construct an identity that is connected to both their consumption of J-rock and their participation in virtual communities.

In Chapter One, I detail the theoretical concepts and methodology that have shaped and guided this study. This work utilizes ethnographic methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data was collected in environments both in the physical and online worlds including virtual communities surrounding J-rock and *anime* (Japanese animation) conventions located in Canada and the United States. An Internet questionnaire was also conducted to collect both qualitative and quantitative data about the demographic of J-rock fans. The key theoretical concepts of 'imagined community,' virtual community, and social networks are also explored in relation to this study of J-rock fan communities online.

Chapter Two is concerned with how fans define J-rock as a music genre. The term J-rock is widely contested and unstable as different groups try to define J-rock in different ways. Constructions of boundaries and sub-categories within the community are based on how J-rock is defined. I also briefly look at the development of Japanese rock music and introduce visual rock, a genre of Japanese music that became introduced into mainstream Japanese culture in the early 1990s. This development went hand in hand with the growth of a North-American J-rock fan culture where visual rock is one of the most popular genres of Japanese rock music.

Chapter Three features a literature review of scholarly material related to the study of fan cultures. J-rock fans are involved in various fan activities that overlap with *anime* and *manga* (Japanese comics) subcultures in both Japan and North

America. It is as much a fan culture as it is a youth subculture. I discuss three Japanese articles related to the study of visual rock and female fans of this music genre in Japan. These Japanese scholars look at fan activities, such as fan comics and costume play, typical of visual rock female fans from the perspective of gender and identity. They connect the visual rock fan culture to being part of girls' culture, and I examine how useful this perspective is to a study of J-rock fan communities. I also look at the work of various Cultural Studies' scholars who focus on fan cultures, 'participatory' fan activities, fan hierarchy, and 'shadow economies' in which fans nurture social and cultural capital that is useful in their fan culture.

Chapter Four explores how J-rock fans describe their experience of Japanese music. How fans define and categorize their experience is important in understanding how they frame their identity and status as a fan within the fan hierarchy and community. Fans contrast J-rock to mainstream Western music, which is considered to be inferior to Japanese music. As many fans do not understand Japanese, the meaning of the lyrics of the song is not as important as the themes perceived through the emotions fans experience when listening to the music and the images of the musicians themselves. The themes that are of importance to fans are connected to base emotions such as happiness, sadness, and depression. The ambiguity of most J-rock songs allows fans to interpret the music on a personal level. Themes of androgyny, sexuality, and openness to being different and unique from others are common messages interpreted from a band's image. These themes play a role in the creation of a self-identity and connection to the J-rock fan community.

Chapter Five looks at how J-rock fan culture is primarily experienced through virtual communities on the Internet. In this chapter I document the role of the Internet in spreading J-rock to a larger group of people in North America and the relationship

between access to a wider variety of J-rock media on interaction and issues of authenticity and commitment. I explore the changes in the fan community structure over time from one large close-knit J-rock community to many small communities. J-rock fans define these smaller communities as connected to a larger sense of belonging to be found with all J-rock fans. I also discuss hierarchies by looking at categories of fans known as 'fangirls' and 'elitists.' These categories reflect the competition and hierarchies that are an important part of fan culture. Yet, they are also categories that threaten a feeling of community and a sense of belonging among fans. As J-rock fans become involved in virtual fan communities, they build an identity that is connected to a subculture that separates them from their peers.

Chapter Six takes a brief look at the commercialization of J-rock in North America. Before 2002, the building of a North-American J-rock fan culture was based solely on the efforts of fans who shared music and information about Japanese rock music with others. Since the first J-rock band came to play at an *anime* convention, various companies have been established that import Japanese music and bands to a wider audience and release official merchandise in North America. Many of these companies continue to target *anime* conventions, a practice some fans dislike as they believe it makes J-rock seem more of a novelty than a valid music genre. Though fans can now see their favourite bands live in concert, they also must deal with the fact that this development means that J-rock is slowly losing its underground status in North America. The introduction of J-rock into the mainstream also means that fans now have more of an opportunity to work in the music industry in jobs that allow them to shape and influence how J-rock is marketed outside of Japan.

And finally, Chapter Seven discusses the perception and understanding of Japanese culture and society from the perspective of the J-rock fan. In order to

understand how consumption of Japanese music impacts a fan's perception of Japan, I explore the general perception of Japan in Asian and Western countries. In Asia, Japan is seen as a model of modernity and socio-economic success. In the West, Japan's traditional aspects such as the tea ceremony and *kimono* are key elements in the construction of Japan. These perspectives are contrasted with that of J-rock fans whose viewpoints differ depending on whether they do not understand Japanese and whether they do understand the language and/or have been to Japan. The 'imagined' Japan that evolves from close interaction with Japanese media is one which helps define a fan's self-identity and their future goals and dreams.

Beyond an examination of J-rock fan culture in North America, this study makes a contribution to the study of music fan culture and cross-cultural exchange through grass roots networks. By studying the J-rock fan community, we can better understand how new subcultures emerge from an interest in media that originated in a different cultural context, as well as the role of the Internet in creating 'imagined communities' in which people are connected by common hobbies and interests rather than nationalistic or ethnic ties. In addition, by exploring how fans create an 'imagined Japan' based on the interpretation and consumption of J-rock, we may understand how the process of globalization has resulted in a multi-directional, cross-cultural exchange in which non-Western countries are influencing Western countries in various ways. Participation in Internet fan communities based on an interest in media originating from another cultural context has consequences on formations of identity and social networks that may cross national boundaries. These are all essential issues that must be examined in a world that it is rapidly becoming globalized.

Chapter One: Methods and Theory

This chapter outlines the research methods employed during my fieldwork, which mainly consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I will discuss some of my experiences with conducting research at Japanese animation, or *anime*, conventions and J-rock related Internet communities, including the ethical concerns surrounding Internet research. The second half of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the theoretical concepts concerning boundaries and community, both on and off the Internet, that have shaped the focus of this thesis.

Methodology

During preliminary research at the beginning of the project, I had observed that a single J-rock fan would be involved in many different centres of activities online including a variety of J-rock related web forums and social networking sites such as Myspace and Livejournal. Considering this, I questioned how useful it would be to study the activities of just one single J-rock centred forum and opted to look at individual fans from different backgrounds and varying interests in genres of J-rock in an attempt to understand the similarities and differences in experiences among fans. Though North American J-rock fan culture is primarily based on the Internet, fans also assemble in the 'real world' offline at places like *anime*, or Japanese animation, conventions or live concerts. With the recent rise of Japanese musical artists coming to perform and hold promotional events at North American *anime* conventions, Japanese music fans are becoming more visible at conventions with many attending to support their favourite musician or band. As such, my qualitative research was centred on different sites including several conventions and web forums.

The bulk of my data was collected from May to September 2006. I also observed J-rock fan related activities online before and after this time period, including some interviews collected in 2004 with North American J-rock fans living in Japan. I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews at four conventions in Canada and the United States: Anime North (Toronto), Otakuthon (Montréal), Otakon (Baltimore, MD), and Anime Evolution (Vancouver). In addition to these conventions, I conducted interviews over the Internet via contacts I established through participation and observation of several online forums and Livejournal communities including Batsu.org, a large web-based forum with 12,000 registered members that covers a wide variety of Japanese rock music, and Canada Jrock, a Livejournal based community of Canadian J-rock fans.

Though there are quite a number of male J-rock fans, the majority of fans are women. This was reflected in the interview participants who took part in the research project and those that filled out questionnaires. For the questionnaire, out of 100 responses, there were 31 male participants and 69 female participants. Of the 25 people interviewed at conventions and on the Internet, 18 are female and 7 are male within an age range of 18 years to 30 years. Many of the interviews I collected at conventions ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes, depending on the informant. Interviews over the Internet took a considerably greater amount of time as the responses were typed instead of spoken, and sessions lasting one to two hours were typically conducted over a period of several days.

There are ethical concerns surrounding how one is to verify the age and identity of participants in Internet studies. This, along with the ethical issues concerning research with minors, meant that I was limited to informants who stated they were 18 years of age and older. I was unable to conduct research with the large

population of fans that are 17 years old and younger – a demographic that seems to be growing rapidly in the past few years as J-rock becomes more accessible in North America through avenues outside of the Internet. Through semi-structured interviews, I encountered different kinds of fans with varying experiences from those who have been J-rock fans for more than six years or newer fans with a history of less than two years. Despite sampling a small number of people, it is a diverse sample that reflects the wide range of experiences that make up the North-American J-rock fan culture.

After conducting preliminary interviews, I developed an online questionnaire that I posted to various Internet forums and mailing lists. As there are a number of fans who are unable to or do not want to attend *anime* conventions, this allowed me to get a better sense of the demographic that made up the J-rock fan culture by reaching out to this group of people through the Internet. The questionnaire was conducted over a period of three months, and I collected 100 responses. Participants had the option to remain anonymous or provide contact information if they were interested in being interviewed. Aside from collecting basic demographic information, the questionnaire included questions that prompted participants to discuss their opinions on J-rock fan culture and the impact of Japanese music on their lives. Some questionnaires provided me with as much information as if I had conducted an interview with the respondent. I gained some useful qualitative data and contacted four people for interviews out of the 65 that left me their contact information.

Out of the four conventions I attended, three had invited Japanese music artists to perform. There were events during the convention featuring these artists such as Q&A sessions and autograph sessions. I attended these sessions, went to any J-rock or Japanese music related panels, and looked for fans in J-rock related costumes. Some conventions also had J-rock meet-ups in which fans organized a place and time

to meet at the site of the convention. These meet-ups are usually orchestrated beforehand over the Internet via web forums or other kinds of online communities. It was through these organized events and chance sightings that I was able to talk to and interact with J-rock fans and find potential interviewees.

One of the issues I had with conducting fieldwork at a convention was finding potential interviewees. I was specifically looking for people who could be dedicated fans of J-rock as opposed to a casual consumer. Various traits include knowledge about the members and songs of various Japanese bands and participation in J-rock related communities on the Internet. These characteristics are associated with someone for whom J-rock has some important role in their life and how they may construct their self-identity. Though I had arranged several interviews beforehand over the Internet, the majority of interviews conducted at conventions were done with people I had no prior contact with. Outside of J-rock related events, it could be difficult to spot a J-rock fan. This was especially true at the conventions in Montreal and Vancouver where there were no or few events related to Japanese music. Conventions are mainly catered to *anime* and *manga* fans; not everyone in attendance is a J-rock fan or is interested in J-rock.

This is one of the reasons why quite a number of my informants were cosplayers, or dressed in a costume that copied that of a J-rock musician. Cosplayers are visibly showcasing their interest to other people when they dress up as their favourite J-rock musician. As I was familiar with the stage costumes of various J-rock bands, it was a way for me to easily spot a J-rock fan and potential interviewee amongst the crowds of *anime* and *manga* fans. People usually make their costumes by hand, a time consuming process if the costume is an accurate replica. As such, someone in a more detailed costume can usually be considered a more dedicated fan

than someone in a sloppy, poorly put together costume. As it involves a large investment of time and resources, J-rock cosplayers tend to be serious fans of J-rock.

Unlike with cosplay, where it was clear how involved someone was with J-rock fan culture, seeing someone dressed in a certain kind of fashion or attending a J-rock event did not tell me how much they knew about J-rock. Even though it would have been harder to find a J-rock fan elsewhere, it certainly was not as easy as on the Internet where fans were collected in one venue like a forum or a mailing list.

At conventions, some people go without sleep or sleep very little or have busy schedules so it was difficult to get informants to concentrate at times. Also I had a very short period of time to build rapport and, with some informants, the deep sense of trust I was able to establish with online interview participants was seldom reached. However, conducting field research at conventions was not without its positive points. For example, I was able to observe J-rock fans interacting with others in a physical setting and see how fans act as a group at concerts and Q&A events. Interviewing people face to face also allowed me to verify that the information I would collect through Internet interviews and an online questionnaire was valid or not.

J-rock fan culture is largely centred on the Internet in various collectives that seem to be most active on PHP-based web forums and Livejournal communities that have come to play a large role in defining J-rock fan interaction online. Participant observation on the Internet is quite different as everything is text based and stored, allowing access to archives of older conversations. In addition, unlike at conventions where I have a physical presence, there is no way for participants on online forums to know if someone is monitoring their activities or not. As a courtesy to the groups I was studying, I contacted the moderators to let them know who I was and my research project as well as introduce myself to the community. It is generally accepted that

everything posted on the Internet is considered public domain; as such, it is fair game for a researcher to use this data as a resource in their research. However, I decided against quoting from these public domain spaces as I feel that many fans are unaware of this and felt that it might lead to some unwanted consequences in the future.

With online interviews, consent was obtained through email after sending the potential participant a consent form and a letter of information outlining details of the project. Interviews were conducted using person-to-person chat programs such as AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and MSN Messenger (MSN). Interviews conducted online were a lot more focused as the interviewee, in the process of typing their response, corrected and rewrote their response before posting it. Internet interviews could last for several sessions lasting one to two hours depending on how much the person had to say and how quickly they could type. This extended the interview across several days and allowed me to develop a closer relationship with the interviewee over a longer period of time.

Theoretical Concepts

North-American J-rock fan culture is largely experienced through the Internet, where most information exchange and social interaction takes place. J-rock fans can interact with others in 'real-life' settings such as conventions and live concerts. Yet fans can only take part in these social environments occasionally, whereas activities on the Internet can occur on a daily basis, making it an important part of their day-to-day life. Fan cultures surrounding science fiction and fantasy genres had been around long before the Internet. However, J-rock fans in North America are able to foster a sense of community and belonging only because the Internet has allowed fans from around the world to connect with each other and share music and opinions. It is

arguable that, without the Internet, this may not have been possible. In this section, I look at theoretical concepts that relate to this study of J-rock fan community such as 'imagined community,' first coined by Benedict Anderson (1991), and the construction of community and social networks on the Internet.

The concept of an imagined community suggests that one does not even need to know all or any of the members of a group to perceive a sense of belonging. Benedict Anderson frames his discussion of imagined community through one of national identity instrumental in creating a nation. The feeling of a shared national identity is a social construct that arises when people believe they are part of a larger group that extends beyond local communities (Anderson 1991). The connection that people have with others is "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). Anderson argues that the widespread access of script-language through print-capitalism, the idea that society is not organized around divine rule and monarchies, and the conception of temporality that blurs the lines between cosmology and history are all key factors have made it possible to imagine nations (1991: 36).

Arjun Appadurai expands on this discussion of imagined communities in *Modernity At Large* (1996). 'Communities of sentiment' that arise across transnational borders lead to agency and change through the consumption of mass media from local or international sources. This can be interpreted as a threat to the nation state, as it allows people to connect and define their loyalties in different ways aside from nationalist ties with the country in which they are currently residing. Appadurai defines neighbourhoods as "situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual, and their potential for social reproduction" (1996:

176). In particular, virtual neighbourhoods created through computer mediated communication, or CMC, help create forms of transnational communication that may be able to bypass the control of the nation-state and major media outlets. The ideas and social networks that arise out of these interactions through virtual communities flow back to lived neighbourhoods. Appadurai is particularly concerned with how these virtual neighbourhoods allow for transnational migrants to remain connected to the communities from which they had previously hailed. These new communities provide further networks and resources from which minority groups can draw to strengthen their political voice and action. It allows people to create ties to virtual and non-virtual communities in other nation-states even when they are physically living in another. According to Appadurai, a community of sentiment is one that is, among other things, created out of the consumption of mass media texts. Consumption can be considered to be a solitary activity. But once people take the images and ideas gained from this activity and interact with others through discussion, it can become a catalyst for group action. For example, deterritorialized groups such as the Sikhs and Tamil Sri Lankans “represent imagined communities which seek to create states of their own or carve pieces out of existing states” (Appadurai 2001: 304).

Both Anderson and Appadurai are concerned with the status of the nation-state in their discussions. Anderson suggests that imagined community strengthens nationalism within a nation state. On the other hand, Appadurai argues that the process of globalization, the availability of the Internet, and the global reach of mass media means that the imagined communities or ‘communities of sentiment’ that are being formed across national boundaries are a threat to the nation state.

To expand on the arguments presented by Anderson and Appadurai, as CMC allows some to create social networks and a feeling of belonging with others in distant

places, it is possible to have imagined communities on the Internet that are not reliant on nationalistic, ethnical or cultural ties, but instead are based on similar interests and hobbies. These virtual communities are imagined as the members of the group have a sense of belonging despite not knowing the identity of every single person. Some people will probably never have the opportunity to meet the people they interact with online. It is possible in an imagined community that is based on the Internet to have people of varying involvement feel they belong to the group. This includes active participants who either contribute or moderate the discussion and 'lurkers,' who only observe the action from afar. Though some scholars may say that some constructions of group unity are imagined, they are still very 'real' for the people that construct and live within them, and this can be seen in constructed boundaries. Cultural boundaries exist as "crucial symbolic divisions that enable people's action, thought, and expression" to relate to many things, including the foreign (Barkow 2004: 453). Regardless of how a person frames their identity, there will always been a distinction made between 'those like us' and 'the outsiders.' Hence, the existence and breadth of an imagined community can be marked by the boundaries its participants draw for themselves.

The Internet allows for different kinds of imagined communities to develop that differ from real-life ones in the kinds of ways in which people build what they would consider to be intimate relationships. Both the term 'virtual community' and 'online community' can be used interchangeably to indicate a group of people who interact on the Internet through various methods of CMC. Examples of methods for CMC include web forums, mailing lists, chat rooms, and participation in other Internet activities. Frequently these collectives themselves are referred to as online communities. There have been many debates about whether or not these virtual

communities foster a real sense of community. Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia write, "people on the Net have a greater tendency to base their feelings of closeness on the basis of shared interests rather than on the basis of shared social characters such as gender and socio-economic status" (1999: 186). Though these kinds of social connections built on interests have been going on within fan cultures in the 'real world' for a long time, the argument Wellman and Gulia seem to be making is that relationships on the Internet are increasingly being built based on similar interests, be it music or political views.

Some like David Crystal argue that "the mere fact of having engaged in an Internet activity does not produce in a user the sort of sense of identity and belonging which accompanies the term community" (2001: 220). This points to the importance of distinguishing between differences in levels of involvement with the Internet that varies from person to person. There are many other critics of the term 'virtual community' who question whether online interaction creates healthy social relationships. Howard Rheingold, in a discussion about these critics, makes an interesting point about the lack of corporeality, lack of regulation, disinformation, and 'flame wars' as potential examples of how "people are less humane to each other in cyberspace, that online discussion disempowers citizens who would otherwise be engaged in authentic civic involvement" (2000 (1993): 351).

However, it could also be argued that on-line communities can be as 'real' or 'imagined' as those off-line for those who participate in them; the Internet makes "possible communities and new social practices that may have been unimaginable before" (Lysloff 2003: 234). Other scholars (Escobar 1992; Wellman and Gulia 1999) note the importance of studying these interactions on the Internet as another form of human experience and/or form of community. Mary Chayko describes the

idea of a 'sociomental' connection that is formed between people that create a feeling of community in her description of Internet interaction and long distance relationships (2002). The Internet becomes a tool from which social interactions and groups are formed in a different manner from off-line communities and hence, creates new possibilities for identity and understanding. Rheingold (1993, 2000) and Peter Kollock (1999) have discussed online cooperation and the gift economy in which information or files are exchanged to directly or indirectly gain social capital. The dynamics of the Internet has also changed significantly because of GUI (graphic user interface) and hypertext aspects of the Web.

Sherry Turkle's research looks at people who role-play on virtual game worlds like Internet text-based multi-user dungeons (MUDs) (1997). Turkle does not seem to focus very much on group experience but rather the perception of and effects of Internet use on the individual. The issue of community is not a central focus of her book, but Turkle does discuss briefly aspects of MUDs that resembled real life human interactions and constructions of communities in the physical world. For example, there are social hierarchies to be found in the MUDs. In addition, many of her informants experimented with gender and sexual relationships. In a way, people are trying to create a virtual world that is somewhat similar to what they experience in real life even though MUDs are inspired by fantasy or science fiction genres. MUDs are alternative social spaces in which people can explore different kinds of social identities that they are unable to try outside the Internet. If there is an illusion of community in cyberspace for the user, engagement in on-line activities does have consequences for life off the Internet. Perhaps it is best to think of Internet interaction not as a substitute but a complement to 'real life.'

Despite originally coining the term, Rheingold suggests that perhaps 'virtual community' is not a very useful expression and proposes that 'online social networks' be used instead (Rheingold 2000: 359). He borrows this term from Barry Wellman, a sociologist interested in social network analysis. Rheingold writes, "social networks emerge when people interact with each other continually, and they have to be useful or they wouldn't exist" (2000: 360). Many of us can draw on social networks of people like work colleagues, friends, family and their own social networks. Even though we might see these people everyday, these are relationships that can be called upon when something is needed, as when looking for a job or a reference letter. Through the giving and taking of information and media on the Internet, people are able to expand their social networks. Depending on the level of engagement, these newly formed networks may or may not have consequences outside cyberspace.

The term 'virtual community' can be problematic because it is used to describe venues for social interaction on the Internet such as web forums, but at the same time, the existence of a virtual community does not always foster a feeling of 'community' or group identity. I propose that it is possible for both virtual communities and social networks to be of importance in an 'imagined community.' Social networks based on hobbies and interests are formed through interaction with others on various virtual communities. Whether fans actively participate in online communities or not, they can still feel a sense of belonging with all J-rock fans even if everyone is involved in different J-rock online communities. Unlike in a community in the physical world, users can move in and out of virtual communities and be involved in multiple communities simultaneously. However, even if one can 'escape' a virtual community by turning off the computer, the experience has a real effect on people's lives. J-rock fans continue to be J-rock fans outside of the Internet.

Chapter Two: What Is J-rock?

Before we can begin a discussion about J-rock fans, it is essential to define the meaning of the genre. It is important to first look at the development of Japanese rock music that culminated in the 'band boom' in the 1980s and the beginnings of visual rock, a genre that is seen as unique to Japan. The introduction of visual rock into mainstream Japanese popular culture has been important in shaping North-American J-rock fan culture, as the majority of fans identify with visual rock more than any other kind of rock music from Japan. I will also examine how J-rock as a genre is defined and described by North-American fans. The differing opinions about what J-rock means is an important discussion that relates to Chapter Five, which focuses on issues of community and constructions of boundaries within the fan culture.

Brief History of Japanese Rock Music

Japanese rock music had its beginnings in the mid-1950s with rockabilly bands and the influence of American and British bands touring in Japan, like the Ventures and the Beatles, in the mid-1960s partly led to similar bands in the 'group sounds' genre in Japan. Though Japanese bands were greatly influenced by American and British rock music, musicians tried to create a sound and style that was different from that of their Western counterparts. The 'group sounds' genre was primarily manipulated by the music industry intent on marketing it to teeny-boppers. However, it was important in that it "contributed to the musical sensibility of young Japanese with music that emphasized beat and vocal harmony, and the idea of music 'for youth by youth' " (Mitsui 2003: 143). During the early development of rock music in Japan in the 1960s, there were debates about whether or not bands should be singing in Japanese or English. Those in the recording industries believed that because rock was a musical form borrowed from the West it was "simply impossible for Japanese rock

bands to achieve good sales, because while Westerners could play 'authentic' rock, the Japanese could only imitate it" (Inoue 2003:193). In the 1970s, there were folk-music bands like Happy End and many others that tried to experiment with new sounds and styles combined with Japanese lyrics. In the mid-1970s, rock music drew on uniquely Japanese genres such as *kayōkyoku*, a term that emerged into wide use after World War II to describe Japanese popular music before being replaced by 'J-pop' in the 1990s, and *enka*, a musical genre that combined the Japanese pentatonic scale with Western influences. The group, Southern All-Stars is an example of how the line between *kayōkyoku* and Western rock was being challenged.

The genre labelled 'New Music,' influenced by American music, emerged in the 1970s. New Music was considered distinct from 'folk' or 'rock' as it focused more on personal relationships and events than social and political messages. It catapulted several singer-songwriters such as Nakajima Miyuki and Matsutōya Yumi into stardom. With its emphasis on writing and performing one's own compositions, New Music was in contrast to the commercialized hit-making system, *kayōkyoku*, in which performers had little control over the kind of music they performed. The boundary between the two genres became vague in the 1980s as *kayōkyoku* took on elements of New Music (Hosokawa 1991: 18). New Music and beat music created an interest in creating and performing music and led to the growth of the Japanese instrument manufacture of instruments such as the piano, acoustic and electric guitar, and electric synthesizers (Mitsui 2003: 144).

It was not until the 'band boom' of the late 1980s that the perception that Japanese musicians could not play 'real' rock music was overturned. The 1980s saw a rise in 'indies' bands that played small local club and concert venues and sold their music through self-produced independent labels. Some of the more popular bands

from this era, like Boowy and the Blue-Hearts, were later signed to major record companies and were influential in shaping what Japanese rock music is today. Visual-*kei* ('visual style'), with pioneers such as X Japan¹, Buck Tick, and Color in the mid to late-1980s, was a part of this underground independent music scene. The rock groups to come out from this 'band boom' eventually created a new venue for expression in which more Japanese bands than foreign are being idolized and copied.

Visual Rock's Entrance into Japan's 'Living Room'

Visual-*kei*, or visual rock, is very popular and well known among North American J-rock fans and could be considered a genre that is unique to Japan and first originated from there. The term mostly refers to the visual aspect of the performance and image of the band. As Inoue explains, "the most important aspect of visual rock is the musicians' visual image, specifically, the bodily representation constructed primarily by makeup and costumes. It is very difficult to characterize the music, which ranges from hard rock and heavy metal to soft or pop rock. Thus wearing makeup is the most important characteristic for the analysis of visual rock" (2003:194). The range of extremity in appearance varies from light make-up to elaborate stage costumes that incorporate an androgynous look and/or cross-dressing.

Visual rock enjoyed a presence in mainstream Japanese popular culture particularly in the 1990s. Though it is not as popular in the sales charts as it used to be, the 'boom' of visual rock during this period has defined it as a genre and subculture recognized by the general public. 'Visual-*kei*' has gained new meanings and usages in the Japanese language. For example, men with good looks who

¹ X Japan was previously known as X. They were one of the visual rock bands to enjoy great mainstream success and a source of inspiration for later visual rock musicians. X had plans to enter the American market in 1992 and changed their name to avoid confusion with the LA-based band of the same name. Entrance to the American market never happened. They will be referred to as X Japan in this thesis.

“highlight them by trimming their eyebrows or dyeing their hair” (Inoue 2003:194) are described as being ‘visual.’ In light of this alternate usage, Inoue and other Japanese scholars have opted to use the term ‘visual rock’ in order to make a clear distinction. In keeping with their logic, I have decided to use ‘visual rock’ and ‘visual bands’ as well throughout this thesis. However, North American fans frequently interchange between different words to describe this genre: ‘visual-*kei*,’ ‘VK,’ and ‘visual;’ ‘visual rock’ is used to a lesser extent. Therefore, I have decided to keep their usage of these words intact in any quotes coming from fans.

Musically, it is difficult to categorize visual rock today as many bands draw upon a variety of influences from genres such as classical, thrash metal, rock, gothic, punk rock, dark wave, industrial rock, etc. Considering the varied sounds of visual rock, Inoue argues that the visual aspect of the bands as conveyed through their makeup and costume is one of the most important characteristics for the categorization and analysis of this genre. Some fans would agree with this. It should be noted, however, that some fans would also argue that there are in fact some musical aspects that, though not unique to visual rock, are typically connected to the genre and that there does exist a ‘cliché’ or ‘signature’ sound that can be attributed to visual rock. Though most people cannot pinpoint the kinds of similarities in music structure, there is definitely a sense of understanding between North American fans when someone talks about how, as an indication of their lack of originality and creativity, a certain visual rock band might sound just like all the other visual bands.

Many of the early visual bands were heavily influenced by Western music scenes. X Japan band leader, Yoshiki, who played a large role in helping establish the visual-*kei* scene, was initially inspired by the performance of heavy metal band KISS as well as the L.A. thrash metal scene. The “fascinating appearance” of David

Sylvain, front man for the English band, Japan², and the do-it-yourself attitude of punk rock were also important points of influence for the first visual rock bands (Morikawa 2003:61). However, it could be argued that this influence from the West seems to have shifted starting with the second wave of visual rock bands that have started more out of admiration for Japanese rock idols instead of just foreign ones. Bands such as Buck-Tick, Novela, By-Sexual and Dead End played an instrumental role in building up an 'indies', or independent, scene and developing the visual aesthetic and performance that would later develop into visual rock. In the 1980s, these bands were referred to as *kamitaté-kei* ('standing hair style') or *keshô-kei* ('makeup style') in reference to their hair that was styled to stand straight up and their use of makeup. X Japan has been credited with being the originator of the term 'visual-kei' or 'visual rock' which developed from the band's catchphrase "Psychedelic Violence Crime of Visual Shock," though as a metal band, it could be argued whether they had any great musical influence on most visual rock bands that came later or not. The creation of the indie label Extasy headed by Yoshiki, then X Japan's drummer, as producer helped launch many popular bands that eventually led the way to the 'visual rock boom' in the 1990s such as Luna Sea and Glay.

Through print and other media, visual rock was becoming more popular as well. Magazines featuring mostly visual rock artists, both major and indie bands, started to appear during the earlier 1990s, including Shoxx, short for Visual & Hard Shock Magazine. Fool's Mate is another important publication that shifted its focus to Japanese visual bands during the same time after covering mostly Western artists such as Siouxi and the Banshees, David Bowie, and The Talking Heads since the mid-1980s. Starting in the late 1980s, various *shôjo* manga, or girls' comics,

² Though they were an English band, JAPAN curiously did not get much attention in their own native country. They had a very big fanbase in Japan consisting of mostly schoolgirls who were drawn to their elaborate makeup and costumes.

magazines featured popular titles such as Kusumoto Maki's *KISS XXXX* and Tada Kaoru's *Miha Paradise* that introduced to a generation of teenage girls the 'look' and intrigue attached to the musicians and the music scene of the time.

Visual rock enjoyed a period in the limelight during the 1990s in what Morikawa describes as an entrance into the Japanese living room, resulting in the visual rock boom (2003). Bands such as X Japan, Luna Sea, Glay, and L'Arc~en~Ciel signed on to major record labels and appeared on various television shows and in newsstand magazines, making the Weekly Oricon³ sales chart, and selling out large concert venues. However, the boom went into decline after X Japan's disbandment in 1997 after which the ex-members pursued solo careers. The sudden death of ex-X Japan guitarist Hide in 1998 was a great shock for many fans. Visual rock experienced a resurgence in 1999 with bands like Malice Mizer, Dir en grey, and Pierrot. Nowadays, although there are still visual bands on major record labels and, sales-wise, some releases make the Oricon charts, visual bands do not get the kind of mainstream media coverage they did ten years ago. Nonetheless, the underground indies scene centred in Japan's major cities and its accompanying fan culture have always been and still are very much alive and thriving.

The Qualities of J-rock

J-rock is an abbreviation for Japanese rock music. As a term describing a music genre, the word 'J-rock' is unstable, polysemic, discursive, and contested within the North American fan community. Though J-rock is used as a general term for all Japanese rock music, people who identify themselves as J-rock fans tend to listen to certain genres of Japanese rock music more than others. How fans define J-

³ Weekly Oricon, short for Original Confidence, can be considered to be a Japanese music sales ranking magazine similar Billboard Magazine in the United States.

rock has implications of power, and boundaries are drawn between groups within the fan culture based on this.

Even though many North American and European J-rock fans may make a distinction between J-pop and J-rock, many Japanese people and the Japanese music industry do not recognize this sort of distinction. The use of the word 'J-rock' in Japan is not very commonplace and usually refers to mainstream Japanese rock music. Visual rock is labelled 'Visual-*kei*,' clearly placing it in a distinctive, separate category. The word 'J-rock' certainly does not carry the same meaning and connotation as it does for fans of Japanese rock music outside Japan, and fans of Japanese rock music in Japan would rarely or never refer to themselves as J-rock fans.

It was of concern to me to know how to define J-rock and, as I began to collect data and talk to fans about it, it quickly became clear to me that though J-rock is a rather broad term, those that called themselves J-rock fans tended to like a certain type of Japanese rock music. J-rock in North America and Europe has somehow become dominated by visual rock fans, even though there is a large group of fans that do not identify themselves as being interested in visual rock, but who might also consider themselves J-rock fans. One anonymous fan that identified herself as part of the non-visual camp, defined the Japanese rock "overseas fandom (as) basically split into those who like visual *kei*, and those who like one or more styles of non-VK rock. The latter group seems to have fewer common points of discussion, since our favourite artists are not unified by a certain look or sound, and therefore, we are broken into smaller groups and there is less sense of 'community' among us" (female, 23, US: September 14, 2006). As expressed by this one J-rock fan, though visual rock does vary in sound from one band to another, the aesthetic and visual appeal that connects visual bands and bands that used to be part of that scene into a separate

Chapter Three: Literature Review

The focus of this chapter is to present a literature review that looks at the J-rock community as a kind of fan culture. This is important as the feeling of community and sense of belonging felt by many fans comes from involvement in certain kinds of fan activities. In this chapter, I summarize the main points of three scholarly articles concerning visual rock fan culture in Japan that are connected to studies of gender identity and Japanese girls' culture. A comparison between Japanese visual rock and North-American J-rock fan culture looking specifically at these issues will also be made in an attempt to examine whether the perspective employed by Japanese scholars may work with a study of North-American J-rock fans. In addition, a part of this chapter is dedicated to connecting the concepts of 'shadow economies' in which fans can gain social and cultural capital that is recognized and useful within a fan culture. Issues that are relevant to J-rock fan community concerning commodification, commercialization, authenticity, hierarchy and identity are also explored by looking at work by Cultural Studies scholars who have studied fan cultures. Many of these scholars place an emphasis on the 'productive' side of fan culture that results in fan-produced works like fan videos and fan fiction. I examine the relevance of this approach to J-rock fan culture. These discussions prepare the reader for the following three chapters that describe in detail the experience of Japanese rock music and the construction of social networks and community through the Internet for the North-American J-rock fanbase.

Visual Rock Fan Culture in Japan

There has been a recent interest in both the media and in academia in examining the consequences of Japanese popular culture entering Western countries.

These works are chiefly concerned with *anime* and *manga* while ignoring other aspects of Japanese pop culture. Examples include Annie Minion's MA thesis, in which she surveyed a large group of American university students to see how an interest in Japanese animation led them to study the Japanese language (2005), and scholarly literature documenting the import of *anime* and the development of a teenage and adult fan base in the United States (Patten 2001), as well as in the United Kingdom and France (McCarthy 2001). An exception would be the book, *Pikachu's Global Adventures: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (2004), edited by Joseph Tobin. It is a collection of articles written by various scholars about the impact of the children's television show, videogame, and merchandising franchise on American children.

From examining this body of literature, the role of *anime* and *manga* in bringing Japanese popular culture to a wider Western audience is apparent. Most J-rock fans become interested in J-rock because they were already interested in or familiar with Japanese culture through *anime* and *manga*. As such, the construction of J-rock fan community and fan activities is heavily connected to *anime* and *manga* subcultures in North America though some J-rock fans consider themselves a separate subculture. J-rock fans can be considered to be part of a youth subculture that is also a fan culture. Because of the connections to *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (Japanese comics), and visual rock, many J-rock fans are involved in fan activities that are not typically connected to music subcultures in North America. These activities include conventions, fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay. Some of these activities, especially fan fiction, can be found in fan cultures of Western popular fiction (science fiction, fantasy, and mystery), television series, and comics in North America. It is in this way that J-rock fan culture can also be referred to as a fandom.

The word 'fandom' is typically defined as a group of fans. The word is derived from a combination of the words 'fan' and 'kingdom.' Groups interested in science fiction, fantasy genres, or Japanese *anime* and *manga* often describe themselves as being part of a fandom. In colloquial use, the term is often used interchangeably with fan culture, and it also connotes a strong connection to fan fiction and certain kinds of fan activities such as attending conventions. This means that, based on colloquial usage, not all fan cultures can be considered fandoms.

There have been some recent anthropological and sociological studies in English about Japanese fan cultures focusing on various genres of Japanese music including Idol pop, *enka* or mainstream pop-rock, that look at the production of the music and the interactions between fans and their idols (Aoyagi 2005; Inoue 2003; Stevens 2004; Yano 2002, 2004). Aside from Inoue's work on visual rock fans in Japan, much of this literature about Japanese music fans does not describe the kinds of fan activities that are typically associated with J-rock fan culture. The literature that does deal with these expressions of fandom centres on *dōjinshi*,¹ or self-published books featuring fan-produced artwork, comics or written text. Unfortunately, these scholarly works only focus on Japanese *anime* and *manga* subcultures with little or no mention of the connection between these activities and certain kinds of Japanese music fans (Barral 1999, Kinsella 1998, 2000; Thorn 2002).

Scholarly material centring specifically on visual rock in Japan is still undeveloped. Both of the resources I found were connected to one scholar, Inoue Takako, who seems to be one of the first to take seriously the academic study of

¹ Though *dōjinshi* are usually compared to 'zines,' this definition is far from perfect. *Dōjinshi* may be photocopied and hand-bound, but many *dōjinshi* are produced through professional offset printing. Zines are typically identified with alternative/underground culture in North America, but in Japan there are some famous *dōjinshi* artists/writers that can make a side career out of selling their *dōjinshi* with print runs that can run into the thousands. Professional artists also use *dōjinshi* as a creative medium free from the restraints of corporate control over their work. (See Thorn 2004.)

visual rock and its fans. She edited the Japanese book, *Vijyuaru kei no jidai: rokku, keshô, jenda* (The age of visual-kei: rock, make up, gender), which provides an interesting discussion of visual rock from the perspective of gender and identity. Her work and the two articles found in this book written by Koizumi Kyôko and Murota Naoko describe visual rock as part of Japanese girls' culture.

Like Inoue, both Koizumi and Murota suggest that the fan activities taken on by female fans are unlike their male counterparts who create their own bands (*bando yarouze*). These three articles connect visual rock female fandom to the larger discussion concerning the role of girls' culture (*shôjo bunka*) in shaping the identity of girls and young women. Girls' culture may include other media such as girls' comics and Takarazuka (an all female revue troupe), all of which are dominated by a female fanbase. Girls' culture as it is presented here does not challenge the existing social order and enforces it by providing young girls with a way to experiment with their sexuality and identity in socially accepted ways before they move on to the social responsibilities of womanhood and adulthood. This is a contrast to the perspective held by some North-American J-rock fans. Many interpret J-rock, especially visual rock, as challenging the status quo and existing corporate structure motivated by profits. This is demonstrated in the underground status of most J-rock bands and the male aesthetics typical to visual rock that combine make-up and costumes that blur accepted gender boundaries.

The connection between visual rock and girls' culture is reflected in the fact that in Japan, visual rock is considered by the general public to mostly be something that teenage girls are interested in. The visual rock fanbase in Japan is primarily made up of females. These girls are called *bandgya*, or band girl, a label they sometimes use to refer themselves. This is usually only used to refer to females who are fans of

visual bands. *Bandgya* are contrasted by *bandmen*, the musicians in visual bands. The age of fans can range from girls in their early teens and women in the mid-30s depending on the band. Fans involved in the visual scene are usually devoted to a few bands. Those who live in the major cities will typically try to attend as many 'lives', or live concert, held by their favourite band. Some are events with many bands playing or 'onemans,' live events with just one band. The visual rock fan culture in Japan has a very strict hierarchy that is played out at these live events, particularly those events held by indie bands. The girls who stand at the front row, nearest to the stage, are the most dedicated fans who attend all of the concerts and events. This is known as the *saizen*, and one has to work hard to earn a place in it. Being in the front row also means that one has to be very fit as it can get very 'violent' and physical with people headbanging or do *gyakudai* in which those in the second row usually turn away from the stage and jump on the back of those in the front. Older fans or those unfit to handle the action usually stand on the side on the livehouse while others fight to get a place in front of their favourite member in the band. These are only some of the rules and etiquette involved with the Japanese visual rock fan culture. Hardcore visual fans in Japan usually latch on to one or two bands that they are loyal to and follow their careers until they disband. Depending on how long the band lasts, after the disbandment, fans might move on to other bands, sometimes involving their favourite member of said disbanded group or give up being *bangya* all together and 'graduate,' or move on from the scene. There is definitely a sense among many Japanese fans that this is a very youth oriented subculture, and it is expected that most fan will move away from visual rock to more 'adult' responsibilities as they get older.

Inoue's article for *Vijyuaru kei no jidai* appears in English as a revised article entitled "Constructing Male Aesthetics in Rock and Makeup: Gender Strategies by

Musicians and Fans of Visual Rock in Japan” (2003). Inoue suggests that instead of challenging existing gender roles, in Japan, visual rock creates a new kind of male homo-social community for realizing “a new category of male aesthetics based on the appropriation of trans-gendered images even whilst producing the music of existing masculine aesthetics” (2003:199). She argues that there are very few women in visual rock, and most of them are vocalists. The few that are musicians are mostly restricted to instruments that are typically seen as more ‘female’-orientated, such as the piano instead of the guitar or drums. To summarize Inoue’s main argument: the visual rock social community is male-dominated and creates little opportunities for women, who continue to remain as fans who idolize the men who have embraced these new aesthetics. Inoue’s opinion is carried further by two articles in *The Age of Visual-kei* that discuss girls involved in fan activities surrounding visual rock fandom.

Koizumi’s article, “Isei wo yosô shôjotachi: vijyaru rokku bando no cosupure fan” (Girls dressing as the opposite gender: visual rock band cosplay fans) (2003), is about cosplay fans who like to emulate the dress of their favourite visual rock musicians. Cosplay is presented in the article as an activity that is dominated by female fans. Cosplay fans are contrasted to the male ‘wannabe’ fans who experience their music fandom through playing an instrument and creating their own bands. Visual rock cosplay can be seen not only at concerts or instore events but also at *dôjinshi* conventions like Comic Market and gatherings of cosplay fans at public places like a local park or print club (*purikura*) booths. Except for concerts, it seems that male cosplay fans are non-existent.

According to Koizumi, rock band cosplay in Japan has been prevalent before visual rock with bands like KISS or Sekijima II, but it was not until the mid 1990s that visual cosplay began to emerge as a typical form of visual rock fan activity

starting with 'wannabe' X Japan fans who wanted to be like their favourite members (2003: 211). Koizumi makes a distinction between cosplay fans who "want to be like band members" (*bando memba- no yô ni naritai*) and those who are "expression maniacs" (*hyôgen kei no otaku*). The "expression maniacs" as defined by Koizumi are a group of female visual rock fans who put their energy towards certain forms of fan expression. These activities include cosplay, which is an "expression of the body," and *dôjinshi*, both of which Koizumi connects to being a part of the *otaku* culture, *otaku* referring someone who is an obsessive fan of something (231).

Cosplay fans that wanted to emulate band members and be like them are connected with the first generation of visual rock that included famous bands like X Japan. As visual rock became popular with bands such as Luna Sea, Malice Mizer, and Shazna, this first group of fans was replaced with "expression maniacs." The focus of Koizumi's article is on these fans who cosplay not simply as a form of "idol worship" (*gûsôsuhai*). These fans are heavily involved with *anime*, *manga*, and videogame fan cultures, and most may have started out as fans these media before starting visual rock cosplay. As a contrast to the first group of cosplay fans, many of the cosplayers in the second group engaged in visual rock cosplay before becoming fans of the music produced by the band they were emulating. These fans see visual rock musicians as not people or icons but perceive them as characters and evaluate them in the same way they would an *anime* or *manga* character. Koizumi suggests it is the ability to see musicians as characters that allows female fans to cosplay or create *yaoi* parodies (233).

The *shônen-ai*, or boy's love, and *yaoi* genre is generally accepted as one that prominently consists of female artists drawing comics depicting homosexual relationships for a female audience. Matthew Thorn, in his own study of female fans

of *yaoi*² *dôjinshi*, has found that for some women, *yaoi* and boys' love stories "allow them to indulge in the fantasy of loving a man as a man, or, to rephrase it, as an equal, free of predefined gender expectations" (2004: 177). Murota's "Shôjotachi no ibasho wo sagashi: vijyaru rokku to shôjo manga" (Finding a place of belonging for girls: visual rock and girl's comics) (2003) deals specifically with these kinds of visual rock parody *dôjinshi* and the depiction of rock musicians, both Western and Japanese, in Japanese girls' comics. Murota writes, "In a society that gives the message that a woman without sexuality is useless, for girls, it is almost like saying that they themselves are useless. In such a society, it is impossible for a girl to find a place of belonging" (2003: 197). In her article, girls (*shôjo*) are presented as being in a liminal stage in which they are inexperienced with the opposite sex and exist without a sense of sexuality (*seiteki sonzai*) that is recognized as an important aspect of being a woman (*onna*); *yaoi dôjinshi* as a "reflection of a girl's self image" is a way of finding a place to which she can belong (*ibasho*) as she experiments with her gender identity (2003: 196). Visual rock musicians, who themselves are like classic character types found in typical girls' comics, being neither completely masculine nor completely feminine, are somewhat removed from these social labels. As such, they are ideal material for *yaoi* fans who escape from these gender labels through self-identification with the musicians they portray as characters in their fan created *dôjinshi* (197).

The message portrayed by the works of Inoue, Koizumi, and Murota is that though these visual rock female fans are able to experiment freely through cosplay and creating and consuming *dôjinshi*, theirs is a subculture that has hardly had any

² *Yaoi* stands for "*yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*" which roughly translates to "no climax, no resolution, no meaning." The term coined some time around 1985 (Thorn 2004: 171). Stories typically skip the plot, jumping to graphic portrayals of homosexuality. *Shônen-ai* means "boy's love" and is much less graphic and may portray non-sexual or sexual relationships between males. Both *shônen-ai* and *yaoi* fiction and comics are usually marketed under the moniker of BL (Boy's Love) in Japan and are of interest to some segments of the North American fan community. Likewise, Japanese fans of Western popular cultural texts are aware of English slash fan fiction.

influence or directly challenged the mainstream status quo. Instead, it continues to support gender division as demonstrated in the various activities that male and female fans choose to take part in. Koizumi writes, “it is important to stress that whether these girls are wannabes or ‘expressive maniacs,’ it is through the experience of cosplay that these girls that have had experiences of physical oppression are able to carry out a personal positive affirmation of their own bodies. ... ‘Wannabe’ girls are not recreating a musical world, but reproducing a visual one through means that are non-threatening to the established male dominated world of rock music” (2003: 240). Visual rock has only succeeded in normalizing the use of makeup and other forms of beauty treatment typically associated with women by men. Musicians and fans through various ways try to “express their rejection of and rebellion against the modern patriarchal order,” but in the end visual rock does not change existing gender categories (Inoue 2003: 213). It is interesting to note that all three Japanese authors, in their discussion of gender and identity, do not stress the importance of social relationships and networks created by participation in fan activities, despite the fact that these are all very much media of social interaction. Though cosplay and amateur *manga* are all forms of individual expression, it could be argued that the importance of these activities and visual rock in the lives of both female and male fans is also rooted in the experience of these activities with other fans.

I found Koizumi’s and Murota’s discussion concerning the connections between *anime* and *manga* subcultures with visual rock fans especially relevant since I had noticed the same trend with J-rock fans in North America. However, one major difference between visual rock fans and J-rock fans is that, though female fans are in a majority in J-rock fan culture, male fans are more visibly a part of the fan culture unlike in the Japanese visual rock scene. Both J-rock male and female fans are

involved in all kinds of fan activities including those considered the domain of female fans in Japan, such as fan fiction and cosplay³. Though there might be more male J-rock fans that started learning to play a musical instrument because of J-rock, there are plenty of female fans who have done the same. The difference in fan activities between the two genders does exist to an extent, but it is less obvious than in Japan. It is accepted among fans that while male fans are mostly interested in the music, for many female fans an interest in the band members is the primary draw. Female fans might be more involved in fan activities than male fans because of the intrigue of the musicians but, when it comes to live concerts and J-rock related events at conventions, the ratio of male and female participants is much more balanced compared to Japan, where visual rock concerts attendees are 90% female.

I once spoke to a Japanese woman who described herself as a dedicated fan of Malice Mizer guitarist Mana when she was in high school, but no longer considers herself a part of the visual rock subculture. She told me that, during that time, she was so involved with supporting Mana and emulating his dress through cosplay activities that she did not have time for a boyfriend. She considered her involvement with visual rock fan culture to be a substitute for or precursor to real relationships with men, as opposed to the imaginary one she had as Mana's fan. North-American J-rock fans do not seem to perceive their involvement in J-rock and the fan community as part of a transition period before entering adulthood. This issue is explored more in Chapter Four. Fans do explore sexuality and gender through experiencing J-rock, but it is a process unlike the one for Japanese female fans.

In looking at J-rock fan culture as a community, it is not particularly useful to examine J-rock fan culture as one solely connected to girls' culture. Teenage girls

³ See Appendix E on page 133 for selected questionnaire responses.

may make up a significant portion of the fanbase, but there are many fans who are women who have graduated from high school, attend university, or work. Many of these women became J-rock fans when they were teenagers themselves. J-rock fan culture can be considered a youth subculture, as the majority of its participants are under the age of 30. However, this largely has to do with J-rock's connection to visual rock, a genre of music that was first established in Japan about 20 years ago as an underground movement, with an English fan community forming over the Internet starting a little over 10 years ago.

Participating in Fan Cultures

Fan culture can be interpreted as one that lies in-between grass roots movements and dominant corporate media as it does not challenge the current media structure. Instead, fans opt to “build on their enjoyment of particular media products, to claim affiliation with specific films or television programs, and to use them as inspiration for their own cultural production, social interaction, and intellectual exchange” (Jenkins 2002: 28). Jenkins is specifically talking about films and television shows, but this same mentality might also be applied to music fan cultures like J-rock. The blooming of this ‘participatory’ culture owes a lot to the photocopier that brought the ability to mass produce print into the hands of the average citizen and the VCR that allowed people to edit their own media content that could then be shared with others. The Internet has become a new way for people to distribute fan fiction and other fan-produced texts to a wider audience.

Some Cultural Studies scholars have focused on the understanding of these fan cultures as a way of giving voice to those who actively consume and interact with their favourite media forms. Several works from this area emphasize a reception

theory and/or ethnographic approach to the study of popular culture instead of solely relying on literary analysis when examining the relationship between audience and text (Harris and Alexander 1998; Hills 2002; Jenkins 1992). Focusing on fan culture means looking at the people who actively use and interpret certain popular culture media texts in their lives. This is a formation of a community of like-minded fans that differs from consumers who might not identify themselves as being fans and do not have the same level of interpretation of these texts as fans do and do not create a dialogue with others. Compared to the 'casual' consumer, fans can seem like obsessive consumers interested in learning all about their favourite things and amassing objects concerning that thing. Fandom, as depicted in these studies, creates a base for consumer activism, particular forms of cultural production, aesthetics and practices through alternative social communities.

In "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," John Fiske (1992) builds on Bourdieu's (1984) idea of cultural economy and cultural capital to develop a theory called 'shadow culture economies' in which he argued that alternative social worlds were created by those that felt they were lacking in official cultural capital to gain a different kind of social prestige within the fan culture. In this article, Fiske is concerned with cultural capital, be it knowledge or objects, which are accumulated in order that fans may be able to better participate with the text. Fandom can take a public form of production called enunciative productivity that can include talking about the media text or through the construction of social identity through one's dress (Fiske 1992). Further cultural capital can be gained through the collecting of various objects that may have meaning for the fan culture such as rare original demo tapes or original television scripts.

Though some would debate whether writing fan fiction or creating any kind of fan work can transfer to mainstream social and cultural capital, fans are able to gain capital within their respective fandom through various activities that influence the sphere of fans. Andrea MacDonald provides some useful categories of various hierarchies or categories of distinction in fan culture that she argues are “moving to the new information technologies with minor structural changes” (1998: 139). These hierarchies include ones surrounding knowledge of the media texts and access to privileged information and the people involved in the production of the media be they directors, actors or musicians. Those in leadership positions in smaller groups within a fandom and people who organize fan events or moderate email discussion lists all exercise some power within the fandom. There is also a distinction made between the level or quality of one’s involvement and participation as a fan in the group. For example, attending an industry convention might not be as prestigious as one run by fans. Fan hierarchy is heavily tied to the issues of authenticity and commitment to the fandom. There is competition within the group as people try to validate to others that their involvement and dedication as a fan is genuine and better than someone else’s.

In addition to Fiske’s cultural fan capital which showcases the knowledge a fan has about their fandom, Matt Hill brings to light the importance of social fan capital which he defines as “the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, *as well as* their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom” (2002: 57) (emphasis in original). Hill suggests that fan social capital has been an underdeveloped area in the study of fan cultures. He argues that even those like MacDonald, who successfully mapped out the various hierarchies found in fan cultures, fail to invoke Bourdieu’s concept of social capital and symbolic capital. One of Hill’s key arguments is the tendency for Cultural

Studies scholarship concerning fan cultures to overemphasize 'productive' fan activities, like fan fiction. He writes, "by stressing that fans are consumers who are (unofficial) producers, the basic valuation of 'production' and the basic devaluation of 'consumption' continues to be accepted. Fandom is salvaged for academic study by removing the taint of consumption and consumerism" (Hill 2002: 30).

Many of the works I have encountered by Cultural Studies scholars are focused on studying these 'productive' fans and analyzing the texts they have created as evidence that it is 'participatory,' and hence important to study, fandom. This overemphasis leads to a sense that production of fan texts is the only evidence for someone's involvement in a fandom, and excludes people who identify themselves as fans who have no interest with fan texts. Even though I have framed the discussion of this chapter around the idea that J-rock fans are involved in 'productive' fan activities, after examining it from this perspective, I have found that it is not as helpful as I had originally thought in looking at the overall J-rock fan community. Aside from those who engage in cosplay, participating in 'productive' fan activities is not the most important part of being a J-rock fan. In fact, many fans are not involved with any kind of recognized fan activity. Cultural and social capital is gained through other avenues. Some fans do participate heavily in activities such as fan fiction, fan art, and roleplaying and receive praise and visibility within the smaller, sub-genre specific communities they contribute to. Participation in fan activities is related to nurturing a desire to develop certain skills to gain 'official' social and cultural capital. But, in terms of examining the J-rock community and fan hierarchy, cultural capital applicable within the community is gained through knowledge, consumption of material goods, and social capital exhibited by knowing musicians or people in the industry. For example, knowledge of the Japanese language allows a fan to

understand information that is inaccessible to those who do not know the language. Fans can gain prestige if they translate and share their work with others. The quality of someone's commitment to the fandom can be judged by whether they have been to Japan or not, and whether they only download mp3s or buy official import CDs. Some of these activities involve contributing to the fan community and can also be seen as ways of building social capital with other fans.

It is also important to consider that fan culture will always be heavily tied to consumption and consumer culture no matter how 'underground' it is perceived to be. Consumption is a key factor to being a J-rock fan. Fan cultures can be interpreted as creating a consumer culture through the consumption of various products that fit a certain image or ideal. When a movement gains popularity, it becomes even more mass-marketed than before. Hebdige writes of youth culture, "once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them in a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise" (1979: 96). J-rock is beginning to be mass-marketed in North America and Europe as businesses, some of them started by fans, are being established that release official media and act as promotion managers for bands in their activities outside of Japan. As the lines between fan and corporate culture are beginning to be drawn, some fans are questioning the marketing of Japanese rock bands at *anime* conventions and the 'selling' of band members' time through the auctioning of tickets for special exclusive events such as dinners that are set up by the marketing company itself. This is a transitional time in which J-rock in North America is trying to establish itself through commercial channels while still relying very much on fan communities for publicity.

Chapter Four: Experiencing J-rock

As J-rock fans are interested in a music genre that originated in a different cultural context, it is of relevance to explore how fans categorize and describe their experience in consuming J-rock related media. Japanese bands produce music with a Japanese, not a Western, audience in mind, and how fans interpret J-rock in relation to Western music is also connected to how they perceive Japanese culture and society. How fans define their experience directly relates to how they define themselves within the context of the J-rock fan community. This process of definition is connected to the fan hierarchy and constructions of various groups and virtual communities within the fandom.

Fans perceive J-rock to be superior to the music of the mainstream Western music industry. Western music is described as “commercialized” and “clichéd,” among many other things. Though many fans do not understand Japanese, the meaning of the song lyrics are not as important as the overall ‘sound’ of the music, which is perceived as unique, and more creative than Western music. Fans connect to J-rock music through personal interpretations and experiences related through emotions such as sadness and happiness. The image of the band also plays an important role in shaping what themes fans identify as important in J-rock. These themes include openness about various forms of sexuality, blurring of gender roles and aesthetics, and the importance of being oneself. The experience of listening to J-rock is connected to the role J-rock plays in a fan’s life. There is a desire for social interaction with other fans, leading to the formation of and participation in online J-rock communities.

Mainstream Western Music vs. J-rock

Fans often talk about their interest in J-rock in relation to the mainstream Western music industry. Though the focus is mostly on the differences between the music, fans also frequently compare J-rock musicians to Western pop stars, claiming that “J-rockers” are more “authentic” and “genuine,” and hence are more “endearing” and easier to relate to. Some fans become so enamoured with Japanese music that they reject any kind of music that is not Japanese. Whether fans reject Western music or not is determined by how long they have been a J-rock fan.

Many fans stated that they started listening to Japanese music in reaction to a general disinterest with recent popular music in North America. As Matt describes it, the popular music being marketed in North America lacks any kind of “depth”:

Everything here is so manufactured and so marketed to a specific audience. I don't like our music scene in the least... I guess it's just growing up. You realize this stuff isn't as good as you thought it was. You want something with more depth. And that's really what I'm going for. I want music with depth. J-rock has it. The music here doesn't. It's as simple as that. (Matt, 18: May 27, 2006)

Others have described the North American mainstream music to not be as “heavy,” “hard core,” “complex,” or “unique” as Japanese music, in particular J-rock. Western music that is considered popular now in North America is described as “dumbed-down,” “ cliché,” “uncreative.” Like Matt, many fans are searching for the same thing — an alternative to mainstream popular Western music, which is being interpreted as overly simplistic both musically and content-wise.

The overall theme that Japanese music is better than Western music prevails throughout many of the interactions I have had with J-rock fans. When asked to compare and contrast Western music and Japanese music, many people opted to point out the negative aspects of Western music to provide a positive counterpoint to the offerings of Japanese music. According to fans, what makes J-rock interesting is

the complexity of the compositions and the emotions conveyed through the lyrics or the sound of the music. J-rock bands rarely stick to one kind of musical style and draw on influences coming from Western musical movements and Japanese and/or Asian musical styles as well. What fans describe as J-rock's "uniqueness" and "newness" partially comes from the flexibility in musical style. In J-rock, rock bands do not necessarily always play rock music and on some level are not expected to do so by their fans. Experimenting with different musical genres is what, in some fans' eyes, makes J-rock interesting:

In way they're not afraid to convey emotion through just the sound and it's a weird mix, because here, you know, pop is pop, rock is rock, but in Japan, they frequently mix it so you can't even tell the difference where they create a whole new sound by mixing all the stuff that they heard. (Crystal: August 5, 2006)

In Western music, a rock band that starts sounding "poppy" might be accused of "selling-out" and lose fans in the process. Western metal bands are always expected to play metal music and might be criticized for introducing punk or rap influences into their music. Fans see J-rock as being more complex because J-rock bands are not afraid to mix different genres and styles in their music. For example, a band like Malice Mizer uses synthesizers and dual guitars to incorporate pop and classical elements into their music with other styles influenced by French pop music and Italian horror movie soundtracks. Malice Mizer is well known for the fugue-like, polyphonic segments in their songs that are played out by the two guitarists. Even though there are some pop and classical elements in their compositions, Malice Mizer is still considered a J-rock band and one of the most popular visual rock bands.

In addition to differences in style and composition, J-rock musicians, also referred to as J-rockers by fans, are also perceived as more 'authentic' than their Western counterparts. For example, Serena comments that when J-rock musicians

play live, they sound just like how they sound on their studio albums, and compares this to North American recording artists:

I'm going into audio production, and one thing I never liked about American music is that now lots of artists tend to use editing and all that stuff in the studio to fix their voices. Japanese artists sound exactly like what they sound like on their albums. I've noticed that because when they sing live, they sound the same compared to other artists that don't. That's what I really like about them. (Serena: August 4, 2006)

Japanese bands are more "authentic" than Western bands because the musicians, in particular the vocalists, do not try to mask their imperfections through studio magic. Not only is J-rock more musically complex and varied, but the musicians are perceived to be more "human" and accessible compared to the celebrity personalities of well-known pop stars such as Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears:

I believe that Jrockers are normal people, really normal people, like next door neighbours, people that we can actually wake up to and take a liking to. Through their music, their words, their ways of action, we can see a new world, an imaginary world where everything is well, and we can be ourselves. (It's) somewhere we can be free and live our lives as we'd like it to be. (Leslie: August 30, 2006)

Fans see J-rock musicians, or Jrockers, as people who are not sell outs only interested in money. Aside from their stage personae, Jrockers are really normal people who do silly and stupid things, just like the rest of us. The human face given to J-rock musicians may indicate that fans see J-rock musicians as people passionate about making music and sharing a certain message:

I could be wrong, but it seems to me that a lot of American bands (are) just in it for the money. I could be wrong though. ... But it seems that these guys here from Japan that they see things a little differently. It seems like it's more than just the fame and the glory. I think they're actually really are trying to reach out to more (people) and send out maybe a positive influence. (John: August 4, 2006)

Some fans connect to J-rock bands not only because the music is "good," but also because they feel they can relate to the musicians. The draw for some North

American fans seems to be that many J-rock bands do not have the same kind of celebrity and glamour of North-American popular music stars. The talent of the musicians is also important, but so is their image as “regular, normal” people.

Not everyone places this sort of emphasis on the band members themselves. When discussing the differences and similarities between Western and Japanese music, few fans brought this up, choosing to focus more on the music. Perhaps it is because of the stigma within the fandom towards those that place more importance on the image of a band over its music that so many people chose to talk about differences in music instead. Nevertheless, as so many fans do not know enough Japanese to understand the lyrics of the music itself, the band members themselves are undeniably an initial draw for some. Some musicians draw high regard from J-rock fans for their musical talent, as well as their looks and charisma.

In general, fans voice a dislike for mainstream popular Western music. However, this sort of negative reaction to Western music also breeds a contempt or outright rejection of any other kind of music that is not Japanese. A number of people confessed to have closed themselves to any other kind of music for a period of time before realizing that they could be a bit more open to other music besides Japanese music. There are also J-rock fans that even reject J-pop because it is pop music, not rock. This is interpreted by some as one of the “problems” with the J-rock fanbase, another reason why some J-rock fans decide to keep a distance from interacting with other fans or online communities:

One thing that bothers me about the J-rock fan scene is the lack of musical taste other than J-rock from a great deal of the fanbase. I've seen a large amount of J-rock fans who dismiss music if it isn't Japanese, or more specifically, if it's American. Even if their entire knowledge of American music consists of a couple of radio singles from Britney Spears, they are very quick to assume that all American rock is inferior to Japanese rock. There are even J-rock fans who dismiss music if it's from China or Korea. I got into American music

after Japanese music, because I realized that I was being biased by assuming that American music wasn't as good. Once I gave it an honest try, I found a ton of good bands. If these people were less biased, they might learn something new. Instead, they are perfectly happy to be musical shut-ins. So much for open-mindedness. (female, 19, Canada: August 3, 2006)

This rejection of Western music is perhaps not only connected to how some J-rock fans place Japanese culture on a pedestal, but might also be tied to the pride fans have in knowing about these underground, independent Japanese bands that no one else knows about. As mentioned earlier, many people start listening to Japanese music in reaction to a mainstream popular music culture they are unable to relate to in North America. The search for unique and "authentic" music is important, especially for those who dismiss all Western music as overrated:

What's funny also is the amount of Japanese rock fans who are completely against American rock for one reason or another. Whether it's their pride in being underground ... is really kind of funny. When everyone talks about the Family Values tour that I know, they refer to it as the Dir en Grey show or I hate Korn. And I'm not sure that any of their accusations are really founded. Because I think that Korn represents, to them, a hard sound brought mainstream and becomes so popular. It's strange with rock, because I believe it's very rebellious that when it becomes so marketed and so huge it loses it, and that's what they call selling out. So, I mean, I really don't think that these accusations are fair. What I wish would happen is that we would see rock for- for what it is is rock. And I think that (is) what I hope that people get out of J-rock in the long run. As they mature, that they see what we have been given by these artists who have been powerful enough to send their message to us is that there is no difference. You can be Japanese rock, German rock, you know, South American rock- just anything. It's just that rock is rock, and I think that (is) what I hope people learn. (Cheryl: August 5, 2006)

Like any music industry, you tend to get a lot of bands that sound the same. When I first got into it, I listened to every band I read about, but after a few years I've now narrowed my list down, and I've realised some of them are just as average as the English bands I didn't pay attention to. (female, 22, Canada: August 3, 2006)

It seems that a large number of fans that denunciate Western music are also newer fans that have started listening to J-rock in the past one or two years. Fans

new to J-rock are in a stage in which they are still struck by the “freshness” of Japanese music, and some try to absorb as much about J-rock as they can. Some people become blind to other kinds of music as they immerse in one kind of music. Many long time fans have gone past this stage, as demonstrated by Cheryl and the anonymous commentator above who both realize that their bias against Western music was unfounded. Considering the kind of backlash some fans have to face from those around them for liking Japanese music, many J-rock fans consider themselves to be more open about new things than their peers. But fans that close themselves to non-Japanese music because it is not Japanese are being contradictory and are as close-minded as those that made fun of them for liking J-rock. In a contrast to the fans who reject Western music, others have mentioned that it did not matter to them whether J-rock was Japanese or not. If it had come from some place else besides Japan they would have become interested in it and the culture that it came from regardless. It is debatable how true this would be, but I do think that it does point out how, after a certain period of time, the ‘Japanese’ quality of J-rock becomes less novel as well as less important as J-rock becomes a normal part of that person’s life.

The mentality exhibited by Cheryl, in which the cultural boundaries for rock music has become less of an issue, seems to be prevalent among long time fans of J-rock and fans in their 20s or older. It is also interesting to note that many of the people who identified themselves as J-rock fans that have no interest in visual rock are mostly in their mid-20s to 30s. This age category also included people who used to be fans of visual rock but have since moved on to other kinds of music, including non-visual Japanese rock and J-indies. For fans, the activity of describing why they like J-rock is one that is very much involved in drawing boundaries and defining categories of in-group, out-group. New fans reject all Western music in an attempt to

create a clear boundary of their own identity. Long time fans, who are much more comfortable with their status and identity in the fan community, tend to be more open about listening to other kinds of music while still retaining their status as a J-rock fan.

Importance of Lyrics and Sound

Though there are many fans who can understand the Japanese lyrics of the music they are listening to, there are perhaps even more fans that have very little knowledge of the Japanese language. Understanding the meaning of the lyrics is important to some extent, but most fans experience J-rock music by focusing their attention on the sound of the music. This section looks at how fans connect to J-rock based on the feeling that is perceived purely through listening to the sound of the music. This affects what fans interpret to be important messages and themes in J-rock.

Within the fan community, emphasis is placed on the meanings of the lyrics, and those who do not know Japanese try to seek out English translations done by fans. However, the quality of these fan translations can vary widely and quite often there are no translations available for a particular song. Lyrics are important but the language barrier means that the enjoyment of the music comes from the actual sounds rather than the lyrics of the songs. Regardless, this phenomenon is not unique only to non-Japanese language speakers who listen to Japanese music. English-language music has been, for many years now, played around the globe by plenty of people who do not know what the Beatles or the Rolling Stones are singing about. And there are certainly many listeners in Western countries who partake in “world music” that do not understand the content of the songs.

A lot of what people enjoy about Japanese rock music is what they enjoy about the *manga*. It's painted in very broad strokes, so, you get things like the lyrics are more lyrical, poetic, and they don't say everything up front, and they paint a little hidden picture behind it, you know. Once again, it comes back again to that word that I said, the soul

of the word (*kotodama*). Even some Americans don't understand that, but there's an emotion in Japanese rock music that is actually strong perhaps stronger than what a lot of the American music is these days. (Dave: August 5, 2006)

Besides Dave, none of my other informants talked about *kotodama*, but I think that the concept explains well the kind of emotional connection fans have to J-rock. Dave brought up *kotodama*, which he defined as the spirit or soul of Japanese words, when he was talking about the previous attempts by Japanese pop artists such as Matsuda Seiko and Dreams Come True to enter the mainstream North American music market. Though these artists have sold millions of records in their home country, their English language albums released in the US have mostly been commercial failures. According to Dave, they did poorly because in the process of translating the original Japanese lyrics into English and re-recording the same song with these English lyrics, the song loses “the spirit of the words” and the Japanese mentality in which they were originally written. Dave and other fans suggest that it is ridiculous to try to translate or dub-over music in the same way that is done for *anime* exported to Western countries. The meaning and original emotional power of the music becomes lost in the translation process. Fans have said repeatedly that, without knowing the meaning of the lyrics, it is possible to relate and understand the music on an emotional level because the spirit contained in the words crosses language barriers.

Frequently, people would describe the voice as “another kind of instrument.” As such, it is not so important for some to understand what the vocalist is singing. The emphasis is not on the message of the song, but rather on how the music sounds and how the instruments, including the vocal, work together to create the whole package that is the song:

I am a big fan of lyrics, which is why I stayed away from J-rock for so long because it's like, I don't understand so they can't speak to me. And as I got older, I started paying more attention to the music and the

subtle melodies. Even though they're not speaking what I can understand, I still get it. I just listen to the song and take it for what it is rather than trying to figure out what they are trying to say because chances are I'm going to be confused either way. The J-rock lyrics aren't that important. (Matt: May 27, 2006)

I first got into it (J-rock) because it was different, but also similar to what I was already used to, and I don't think that's changed I think because I don't understand the words too well, I concentrate more on listening to the actual music, so I've gained an appreciation for that. (female, 22, Canada: August 3, 2006)

The language barrier does not prevent some people from listening to music sung in a language that they do not understand. In the case of J-rock fans, not understanding the lyrics has also made it easier for listeners to pay closer attention to the sounds of the music. Through the process of repeatedly listening to the music, fans learn how to be discerning about what kinds of music they like and how to “unpack” the various elements that work together to make up the entire song:

You have an image in your head when you first listen to the song, and then some of the images may change when you see the translation, but it just makes it so much more beautiful. It's almost like levels. First level is to hear the music the first time. You hear the song once, and you're like, 'oh that's a kinda neat song.' Then you listen to it again, and you pick up on the little things like the bass line and the drumbeats and the way the guitar is played and the voice. Then you pick up the emotion the next time, and after you read the translations and go back, it's like a whole other dimension. Every time you listen to it, there's a new layer- something you've never heard, something you've never noticed until now. (Patricia: May 26, 2006)

Patricia's experience when listening to J-rock is similar to an exploration with each listening bringing into light new and different elements to focus on. Many J-rock fans, prior to listening to Japanese music, had little or no knowledge about music and rarely paid attention to the separate instruments that work together to make up a song. Many have noted that, after listening to J-rock, they have learned to be more appreciative of music and more conscious of the music they choose to listen to.

Not only does not understanding the lyrics allow the listener to focus more on

the elements of the musical composition, but for some, understanding what the lyrics are saying is actually a detriment to enjoying the song.

The thing I like most is the sound of J-rock music. It sounds very different than North American bands. I think a lot of this has to do with the fact that I can't understand Japanese ... and so cannot pay attention so much to what the lyrics are saying and instead can fully appreciate the sound of the music itself. When I tried to listen to a large number of the 'popular' North American bands currently, I found myself disliking them strongly. For one, I could understand what they were saying and the lyrics were horrible. Secondly, I find the sound of the English language itself annoying while I find Japanese to sound quite nice. And thirdly, for some reason the North American bands seem to have something missing from their songs. They just don't sound right to me anymore or they all just sound the same. (female, 24, Canada: July 29, 2006)

For those who can understand the lyrics or have access to translations, they enjoy the ambiguity of Japanese language lyrics. Japanese lyrics, especially those in J-rock, are described as being less "direct," and hence more "poetic." Others have talked about how they dislike the sound of English, especially when it was used in song lyrics, as it ends up sounding "cliché," "tacky," and "overdone." Japanese lyrics are ambiguous and, as one person described it, "ephemeral" and open to various interpretations, so even if someone does have a working knowledge of the Japanese language, it can be challenging to understand them.

It was difficult to get people to talk about the themes that they thought were central to J-rock because so many fans have little knowledge of the Japanese language and J-rock is such a broad category encompassing a variety of influences and messages. However, because there is an emphasis on the sound of the music, fans tend to equate J-rock with various basic emotions. These emotions are coupled with an interpretation of the band's image to create a perception of the importance of J-rock on an individual level.

Emotions and Image

When asked about what they felt were major themes in J-rock that are important to fans, some thought that there are none as so many fans do not understand Japanese and therefore have no knowledge of the message of the music through lyrics. On the other hand, some place a lot of emphasis on the ability of fans to connect with and understand the music in their own way without having to know Japanese. After meeting so many people that have said that they have been moved to tears by a song being sung in a language they do not understand, I believe that the ability of J-rock to communicate emotions through sound cannot be denied. The emotions fans associate with listening to J-rock as well as the image of the bands all equate with the kinds of themes that fans see as important in J-rock and significant in their own lives.

Comparing fans that do not understand Japanese to those that do, the kinds of themes they agreed on mostly had to do with “base emotions.” I categorized the emotions that appeared frequently into two categories (negative and positive) to express their nature. In the ‘negative’ category were emotions such as sadness, pain, suffering, loneliness, loss, and anger. In the ‘positive’ category were hope, happiness, and dreams. These are emotions everyone has experienced in one way or another. The themes described here by the fans I talked to are an indication of the personal nature involved in the interpretation and experience of J-rock. One person explained that she liked J-rock because it dealt with inner feelings with a vague atmosphere instead of songs describing a particular situation like in American or Western music. Here the issue of Western music being too “direct” and not “poetic” enough arises.

Most of the base emotions belonged to the ‘negative’ category, and I interpret this to indicate that fans are connecting to these emotions as they are some of the ones that are difficult to deal with in their lives. J-rock becomes another method in which

to control and understand the emotions going through one's mind. When one feels stressed out or depressed about something, J-rock is a way to deal with it. Someone had jokingly said that J-rock is a cheaper alternative than going to therapy.

There are fans who connected with J-rock very much during their 'adolescent years;' years that are typically considered to be filled with angst and ennui. For Elaine, adolescence was marked by a period in her life in which she dealt with negative feelings and problems by listening to J-rock:

Maybe it was adolescence, but through music I was trying to exteriorize my, sort of, anger, this kind of negative feelings. So when I got to know this band which is really aggressive, I don't know, it just fit my mood or it really appealed to me. ... My high school years weren't that good, so I listen to this kind of music talking about negative feelings I could sort of relate to them. But now I don't really. Now my favourite lyrics are either the funny ones or the love songs.
(Elaine: June 11, 2006)

As she has shifted from connecting to negative topics to more positive ones, she feels that her adolescence has already ended. Elaine started out as a fan of Dir en grey, known for their heavy rock sound and "dark" lyrics, and some visual bands; she later shifted to becoming a fan of *angura*, or underground, bands and is still a fan of J-rock, just a different kind. There are quite a number of people who listened to J-rock when they were in their teens but began to lose interest in J-rock as they grew up and their tastes in music and attitude towards life changed. Some leave Japanese music behind completely or move on to other genres such as J-Indies or J-pop. Though there are fans who do leave the J-rock fandom after they reach a certain age, for a large number of people, the music still plays a large part in their life, and they continue to identify as J-rock fans and participate in social interaction with other fans. For these fans, J-rock has helped them to deal with their adolescence but still holds relevance after that stage and continues to act as a way to cope with certain events and vent emotions.

Fans also infer from J-rock various messages important to them that come from interpreting both the music and the image of the bands themselves. This is especially the case with visual bands. Depending on the band, light makeup or very elaborate makeup is involved in creating a unique look that can sometimes be androgynous. Visual bands also feature many musicians who wear feminine stage costumes and have a 'female persona' on stage. For some, these visuals were the initial reason they started listening to J-rock, though some have cited the music as being their first step to becoming a fan.

Either way, the images of visual bands are very stunning and different when compared to the bands in North America that do not seem to pay attention to their image in the same way. From the reaction of those around them, North American J-rock fans have come to expect that there are going to be some people who are not so open-minded in looking at visual bands and see them as too extreme or just "wrong." Cross-dressing and androgyny becomes normalized as listeners of J-rock become more familiar with the genre, whereas the initial reaction for most people would be that these musicians are gay or part of gay culture. There are a number of J-rock musicians who are homosexual but, for the most part, many visual bands choose to be visual because they might have been inspired by famous visual bands like X Japan and Luna Sea and are also using the visual image as a gimmick to get more fans, as female fans are generally attracted to the costumes and makeup. The J-rock look becomes something that both male and female North American fans want to emulate:

I'm straight, but I will tell you right now there's a lot of people from J-rock- there's some very good-looking men. They take care of themselves. They watch their figure. They eat right. And, they look good, and I actually kind of look up to them. You know what? I think I should start to take better care of myself so I can do better. I mean, let's face it, ladies like a fit man. They like one that takes care of himself, not one that's all like a slob, like a lazy person that don't do

much of anything. So, there is an importance in appearance. (John: August 4, 2006)

John sees the care that J-rock bands take in perfecting their appearance to be refreshing compared to what he has seen in Western music. The day that I met John he was in a cosplay of one of his favourite musicians from the band Dir en Grey. Noticing that many females are interested in the look of J-rock bands, John too wants to take more care of his own appearance in order to be more attractive. Many female fans feel that J-rockers are “prettier” than they are, and a number felt that they had to try harder to look nicer. An interest in recreating the look of J-rock artists has led many to become interested in Japanese youth fashion and clothing labels like h. Naoto and Moi-Même-Moitié.

It’s definitely made me more open, because back then I wasn’t so exposed to cross dressing and the sexual tones and that kind of stuff. To be honest, it’s helped with my sexuality. And that’s the biggest part. I’m more willing to appreciate beauty in any form, and I think that guys in dresses are really great. (Serena: August 4, 2006)

As they become used to looking at these kinds of images, it seems that J-rock fans also tend to take a liberal stance on issues concerning sexuality and gender. Looking at the stage costumes as well as the music, many fans feel that one of the important themes in J-rock is that it is acceptable to be different from everyone else. “Being yourself” and “being comfortable with who you are” were two phrases that popped up frequently from the interviews and questionnaires I collected. These common themes that fans relate to from being interested in J-rock connect to how they frame their experience and identity in relation to their peers.

Defining the Experience

By becoming a serious listener of J-rock, someone who pays attention to the music and the musicians and has an emotional attachment to both, J-rock fans create

an identity that is related to the consumption and experience of Japanese music. This separates them from their peers, something that is of importance for younger J-rock fans who are still in high school or just entering university. Though some fans do not want to define their interest in Japanese music as a rebellion against the existing social order, parents and others around them may interpret attachment to J-rock as a form of rebellion, as the music is sung in another language and the image of the bands can be considered shocking. By enveloping themselves in popular culture from another country, they are essentially rejecting North American mass media and recognized youth movements such as punk, goth, and other subcultures. Here we see the formation of a new youth culture in North America as J-rock fans try to find others like them or 'create' more fans by introducing J-rock to other people.

Elizabeth and Marie, both 18 and from a small town in the northwestern area of the United States, felt that they could not identify with the various social groupings at their high school such as the 'preppy kids' and 'the jocks.' They rejected the Abercrombie & Fitch clothes that everyone else wore, embracing instead fashions inspired by their favourite J-rock musicians. Though they do not perceive listening to J-rock or having an interest in Japanese culture as a form of rebellion, which they defined as wanting to "screw the government, take over the world," it certainly plays a large part in creating a unique social identity which they can attach themselves.

I wouldn't say anything about rebellion. It's just a matter of taste. And- Yeah, I really do enjoy not dressing like everybody else because that's... fun. But it's not like I wanna to, oh my god, be different because, oh my god, everything else is sucks. ... It's not, like, the only reason. It's just one of the reasons why it annoys me when people are like, oh my god, you're dyeing your hair because you want to be a rebel or something. Oh my god, conform. No, I like my hair coloured pink because I think it's pretty. (laughs) This is what I like. I'm sorry not a lot of other people like it, but I do. (Elizabeth: August 4, 2006)

Like many other fans, Elizabeth describes her attraction to J-rock as based on something that fits her personality and personal taste and refuses to frame it in relation to making a political or social statement.

Not wanting to be alone in their interest, both Elizabeth and Marie worked together to introduce others to J-rock, or in their own words, “convert” others into becoming J-rock fans like they were. They were able to create a group of around 13 people who shared this interest in J-rock and, before they graduated, they made sure to leave “seedling” people to pass on the word:

In school we've honestly been called the J-rock group. And somehow or another, our school actually figured out that they're not just weird, they're really weird because they like Japanese rock. Well, you know, we actually managed to create our own clique within the school because of all the people we managed to convert. There's a lot because we had ten to fifteen people in our school in it. (Elizabeth: August 4, 2006)

Elizabeth and Marie were not simply considered outcasts of their high school social structure just because they did not fit in or were not a part of the high school ‘popular’ crowd. By creating a “J-rock group,” they were able to reject the available cliques at school and create a clique that had a special identity that represented certain qualities connected with J-rock, including “being weird,” but in a distinctive way. Both Elizabeth and Marie did not really fit into the typical societal moulds but have created a new social category at their high school through J-rock.

A few fans also interpreted “rebellion” as having a meaning similar to the one Elizabeth and Marie described earlier, and, as such, see that J-rock is just music, not something that one would want to act out in real life:

It's just music. It's just something to listen to pass the time or just to listen to, but, it's just music. It's not a way of life. You wouldn't want to act upon the lyrics. Like I said before, there are some lyrics that are talking about hurting people, killing people or destroying things. Yeah, whoop-de-do. If I want to destroy things, I'll play a videogame and destroy stuff instead of going and actually doing something. But, if

there was a song or something that's just saying go out there and do this, kill this, you know, screw that. I'll listen to music and not the words. (John: August 4, 2006)

John seemed to have a lot of issues when it came to controlling his anger and finding socially appropriate ways to dealing with his emotions. John is relatively new to J-rock and probably still has to deal with a lot of misunderstanding from others who do not share his interest in J-rock and Japanese culture, and can get defensive sometimes. He emphasized many times that though the lyrics might be violent or dark, they do not carry a political or social message that listeners are supposed to act out in real life. There were others like John who saw J-rock as "just music" and could not understand why I was studying J-rock and the surrounding fan culture so deeply.

Though Elizabeth, Marie, and John interpreted "rebellion" to mean something that I did not expect, it does tell us that J-rock is not connected to a sort of social or political movement calling on its listeners for action or involvement in some kind of change. There are some J-rock songs that deal with political or social issues, such as anti-war songs, but fans do not interpret these songs as calls for public protest and rallying even if some people do agree with the message.

Leslie, a Chinese-Canadian who has been a J-rock fan for ten years, observes the differences between how J-rock is interpreted in Japan and North America:

In the East, I don't think it's conformity. I think it's something normal. For as long as I can remember, Japan's had J-rock. So, it's a part of their culture. It's not conforming to anything. If anything's conforming, it's the fans conforming to liking a band or whatever. However, to the West, I think it's rebellion. Take Dir en grey, for example. As they are the only people that have toured North America. When they first went to the US, the reports of Kyo scratching himself and so on was huge. They (music press) were shocked, they were surprised, they were fascinated, they were scared, they were interested, there were many things. It got people looking at things more, paying attention to them because they stood up. However, in Japan, you ask any Dir en grey fan, they'll shrug and tell you that's it's way normal. And if he didn't do it, then it would not be normal. Once again, I think

it's the culture difference that'll make people see things differently.
(Leslie: August 31, 2006)

Leslie makes a valuable observation by understanding that visual rock is a subculture well recognized by the general public in Japan as compared to the US. Outside Japan and in Western countries, it is still considered very new and very shocking, especially as portrayed by the music media. As such, it becomes labelled as something rebellious, while it is commonplace and expected in Japan. Even though visual rock can be considered to be a part of Japanese culture, some fans see J-rock as actually challenging what is considered appropriate in Japanese society through their dress and the lyrical content of the music:

It breaks boundaries for traditional conservative people, and they do a lot more that's geared towards a younger people with the clothes and the fashion and the music and all that stuff. (Like in) the way they dress. Before that most bands didn't really dress up and there was no cross-dressing. And I think that helped them. I think it's just another way to express themselves and female fashion is more- they have a wider variety. (Serena: August 4, 2006)

From J-rock, things like S&M, suicide, and murder come to mind. Is that a terrible thing to say? Because they were 'forbidden' topics, they want to deal in the forbidden. For some of them, I think they might feel it's important to address these topics instead of pretending they don't exist. Like Kyo of Dir en grey, well, he's really a masochist. And Yoshiki (from X Japan) has really had to cope with the suicide of a family member. (Diana: August 7, 2006)

By extension, topics that can be shocking for conservative Japanese can be considered taboo in North America as well. Though J-rock bands are not calling for a revolution, some bands use their music to discuss issues that are difficult to talk about or are being ignored in Japanese society, such as abortion and sexual abuse.

Some fans do not feel that their interest in J-rock is connected to any form of rebellion. Like Elizabeth, they feel that it is a matter of taste and interest, even if what they like is a little different from what others around them might consider 'normal.'

Even so, Leslie has noticed the reaction of her friend's parents after she had introduced them to J-rock:

I do believe that at least from the parents' point of view, it's a form of rebellion. As for my friends, I think they're just interested. ... I think it's the language barrier that sets the parents off. ... People get interested really quickly, really obsessed, all they can talk about is J-rock. The parents look at them as the 'evil' thing that is perhaps trying to destroy their child, and at the same time, the lyrics could be like Luna Sea's lyrics- the nicest things in the world. So to me, the language barrier probably creates some problems. (Leslie: August 31, 2006)

The language barrier prevents parents from knowing what it is their children are listening to, which could be a source of worry for some. The content of J-rock itself from the lyrics to the image of the bands can also be considered controversial and rebellious by parents and other "grown-ups." Leslie's friends seem to be interested in J-rock just because it is new and different and are not exactly getting into it for the thrill of shocking their parents and others around them. Being Chinese, even Leslie has to deal with her parents who dislike her interest in Japanese culture. Though Leslie does not see her and her friends as purposely rebelling, there are others like Cheryl who interpret her and others' interest in J-rock as a rebellion that runs counter to youth subcultures in North America that are becoming mainstream:

In America I feel it's very connected to the sense of teenager hood and also sort of an ultra rebellion in that a rebellion against the mainstreamization of the Korn of the world in that being so, so underground as to be separate from the stereotype of teenagers as being consumers of all mass media. It is, by separating ourselves into this other world, that we become like rebelling against rebellion. ... (It's) a sort of a subtle ultra-rebellion. (Cheryl: August 5, 2006)

Interest in J-rock is not something that can be described by clear-cut categories like rebellion or conformity; in some ways, it is about "freedom of choice" and finding the things that fit your personality and identity because you cannot find

those things in your own culture. This is demonstrated in Melissa's story about the role of visual rock in her life:

Each person is looking for something very particular that they can't find locally, and they end up finding it in J-rock. I got into VK when I was about 14. At that time I was looking for something very unique, something I could almost call my own. I think VK filled that void very nicely. As horrible as it sounds, I live for VK, there's not 'if' about it at this point, VK has become 'do or die' for me. There's no way I could get out of it at this point. I think I've tied my life up with it far too tightly. ... I think I found a reason as to why it all happened this way. My family moved a LOT when I was a kid, so I was always changing schools and by the time I was a teenager I was quite different, and for awhile I wanted to fit in with the goth kids at school. They didn't like me. So basically I only had one good friend though all of highschool. At the beginning of highschool for one year we listened to VK together and had a lot of fun just being by ourselves. But then I moved again and while I had casual friends at my new school, I didn't have anyone I really niched with so I preferred to spend the majority of my time alone. The natural need for human contact was voluntarily filled by VK, and that way it was cemented to me. There came a point where I just cut myself off completely from people besides my parents because I just didn't want to be a part of society; I much preferred sitting up in my room and listening to music while studying. (Melissa: September 12, 2006)

It could be argued that to say one likes J-rock is a form rebellion as J-rock fans are embracing something that others are not familiar with. Some fans like Cheryl interpret it as this, and others like Leslie notice the problems that arise between J-rock fans and those who are not open to the possibility of youth finding a connection to and meaning in media beyond their own cultural background. Even if some fans do not want to call it rebellion, on some level it is certainly a rejection of the mainstream media available in North America. While many peers their age attach themselves to various trends that are promoted through the mass media in North America, J-rock fans are looking to Japanese popular culture as an object of attachment. This challenge to North American media is strengthened when consumption of J-rock is connected with social interaction with other fans to create an imagined community.

Chapter Five: J-rock Fan Communities

J-rock fan culture is primarily experienced through the Internet. J-rock fans are spread throughout North America, but there is a concentration of fans in metropolitan areas such as Vancouver, Toronto, Los Angeles, and major cities on the east coast of the United States. Even though fans can have the experience of interacting with other fans in 'real life,' these instances are not frequent and seem to be mostly limited to conventions once a year or at the sporadic J-rock concert. As such, the Internet is very important for the J-rock fan culture, and the majority of J-rock related communities outside of Japan are based on-line.

This chapter is concerned with looking at J-rock fan culture on the Internet. First, I describe the environment in which most J-rock communities are found: web forums and communities on Livejournal, an online journal service. These environments in which most social interactions take place are important in determining how fans experience and define a 'community.' I also briefly discuss the spread of J-rock media in North America. As J-rock media files and official merchandise become easier to access, there are more casual and younger fans who become involved with the J-rock community. This also has implications for the conception of 'online communities' and a 'sense of belonging' within the J-rock fandom. J-rock fan culture places importance on certain values, which include purchasing official merchandise, and fans may be described as 'fangirls' or 'elitists' if they do not fit in. These terms are part of the J-rock fan hierarchy that is important in the construction of a group identity. On the other hand, the competition between fans sometimes leads people to refrain from contributing or drives fan to leave the J-rock fandom completely.

The Online Community Environment

Before 2000, the majority of J-rock fan interaction was occurring on mail servers or mailing list services run by companies such as Yahoo! Groups, web forums, and on-line chat rooms. Over time, most of this activity between fans has shifted to other interfaces. Based on data collected through interviews and an online questionnaire, the most important centres of fan interaction can be found on Livejournal and web-based forums with Myspace trailing behind. There are also a small number of fans that use IRC (Internet Relay Chat or chatrooms) or Mixi, a Japanese social networking site that can be compared to Myspace. There are still J-rock mailing lists, but the ones that I have observed have become less and less active over the years such as the 'J-rock' and 'J-rock_fic' Yahoo mailing lists. The major focus of my online participant observation has been J-rock related web forums and Livejournal communities. Before continuing this discussion of J-rock community, it is important to look at the kind of interfaces employed in web-forums and Livejournal to understand the constructions of community and belonging in J-rock fan culture.

The majority of recent web-forums are created using open source PHP code, allowing for a graphical interface and different options such as member icons and private messaging. In order to participate in the discussion at these moderated forums, one must sign up for an account though some forums do allow people to observe discussions without having to undergo the sign up process. A typical web forum is divided into various sections in an effort to organize discussion. By clicking on the link to a certain topic, one will find related discussion threads. Most topic headings have an icon of some kind next to them. If the icon is in a bold colour, this indicates that a new topic or new message has been added. Inside the topic, new discussions have highlighted icons, as well as previous discussions that have had new messages

participants in Livejournal communities can learn more about the other members by looking at their journal. Aside from band or genre specific J-rock communities on Livejournal, there are also a number of communities dedicated to sharing and exchange of J-rock related music and video files and magazine scans.

Both the environment of the web forum and the Livejournal allows the user to easily disengage themselves from conversations that they have no interest in. Users are also able to learn more about the people who participate in the forum or the Livejournal community. By clicking on someone's username in a Livejournal, it is possible to learn more about that person by reading their journal. This is a different environment from mailing lists and chat rooms where it is not possible to learn more about other people in the community without contacting them privately. Also, in the case of Livejournal communities, it is possible to join multiple communities but not feel any kind of social attachment to these communities. It is also possible to observe most of these web forums and Livejournal communities without having to join as a member. All of these qualities affect how J-rock fans frame their concept of community on the Internet.

Spread of J-rock Media in North America

The Internet offers a way for those who are not living in Japan to exchange information and media instantaneously and create social relationships at a distance that was not thought of before wide Internet use. Unlike *anime* fans, who are able to choose from a wide array of titles and merchandise localized and released for a North American market, many J-rock fans still rely heavily on Internet media sharing or music stores based in Japan to gain access to their favourite music because many Japanese musicians, mainstream or otherwise, do not release their music officially in

North America or Europe. The methods in which fans are able to access J-rock related media and merchandise have a direct impact on how the fan culture is structured on the Internet. Because it was difficult to obtain official merchandise and mp3 files from rare and unknown bands, fans part of the early J-rock community placed emphasis on the importance of buying official CDs and prestige was given to those who owned rare items. As it became possible to download a wider variety of J-rock music, both major and 'indie' label bands, there are more casual and younger fans who do not put the same emphasis on buying the original CDs, and many people are content with downloading music files. This has consequences for the fan hierarchy and competition that may lead to the formation of new virtual communities.

Prior to widespread Internet access, it was rare to find Japanese music fans in North America who did not live in or have access to cities that had a decent sized Japanese immigrant population or an Asian population or had travelled to Japan for school, tourism or work. Local Japanese-owned businesses such as bookstores or supermarkets and Japanese shows on public access television channels were ways in which people came across Japanese music, later becoming fans.

Before cable and DSL Internet connections and larger computer drives, media file sharing, especially video files, was not as prevalent over the Internet. The snail mail trading networks that originated from the various *anime* clubs located across North America made a natural transition to the Internet, making it easier to establish trading contacts. These networks were international, and along with *anime* and Japanese films, many of which have been subtitled by *anime* clubs or individual fans, people started to trade Japanese music related videos and music as well. Trading by snail mail was very important for some fans because there was no other way at the time to get access to some of these videos that might retail from 10,000 yen (about

\$100US) brand new in Japan. Though mp3s were being shared over the Internet through venues such as FTP servers and chat rooms, mp3 files of bands that were not on major labels or popular with the North American fanbase were scarce, and fans that were interested in the 'indies' scene often times had to order directly from record shops in Japan that catered specifically to the underground rock scene. Many of the fans that started their collection of J-rock materials through tape trading ceased to do so sometime around 1999 as it became easier to distribute and trade video files over the Internet. Trading videotapes was a slow process and required a great deal of trust building, expense, and time for both parties involved.

Today, J-rock fans are familiar with popular peer-to-peer software such as Bittorent and Limewire. Sites like Sendspace and Rapidshare allow users to upload files for free and links are usually posted to forums and Livejournal communities that exist solely for the purpose of sharing mp3 files of J-rock music. In addition, video streaming sites like Youtube are host to a great number of J-rock related video clips. It is now also easier to order Japanese music related merchandise online as more Japanese music retailers are willing to do business with an 'overseas' clientele on the Internet. Promoters and companies involved with bringing Japanese music acts to North America and Europe have already started to sell J-rock merchandise through their sites as well, and recently popular mall retailer, Hot Topic, have started to carry CURE, a Japanese visual rock magazine focusing on popular 'indies' bands, and T-shirts that feature the popular J-rock band Dir en grey.

Needless to say, compared to the mid-1990s when the North American J-rock fanbase was only starting to grow as a virtual community, it is now much easier for a J-rock fan to access J-rock related media, be it downloaded for free or purchased on or off the Internet. Though fans do put emphasis on owning official merchandise as a

sign of prestige, the number of casual fans and younger fans who download files without ever buying an actual CD is growing. A similar trend can also be observed with North-American *anime* fandom starting around the time that TV channels like Cartoon Network began showing *anime* for a teenage and adult audience as part of late night programming. This, combined with wider access to fan subtitled *anime* that were being released and downloaded over the Internet at a faster pace, meant that the *anime* fanbase was quickly becoming popular with a larger audience that included younger fans and more casual fans as well.

Downloadable media has helped many people become familiar with J-rock artists, but at the same time, as the music from more major label and underground bands can be accessed through various avenues on the Internet, it is no longer necessary for people to buy a CD to actually listen to it. This has affected how the J-rock fan culture is organized on the Internet. The older fan community was much more close-knit because information and products like CDs and videos were rare. It used to require a relatively large investment of effort and money to procure copies of rare items such as first pressing or demo tapes. These items are still difficult to obtain, but as file sharing over the Internet has become easier, all kinds of Japanese music becomes widely available to a larger number of people, especially those that do not have the means to spend a lot of money for imported CDs and DVDs. With the abundance of media and information, the J-rock community has splintered as people break off to join virtual communities centred on a particular band or genre.

From One Community to Many

Most J-rock fans consider an online community to be a place for like-minded people to gather, have discussions, and share in a friendly environment. The

meaning of 'community' has changed over the years as widespread availability of J-rock related media and merchandise both on the Internet and at conventions has led to a boom of J-rock fans. Many of these fans include those that might be considered casual fans and/or younger fans in their early teens. There is a separation in the fan culture between the long time fans, who tend to have a history of six or more years in the fandom, and newer fans. This has led to a splintering of the groups on the Internet. What was once considered a close-knit community that encompassed all kinds of J-rock fans in which everyone knew each other has been replaced with a large number of small virtual communities that cater to one J-rock genre or band. Despite the many different communities that are perceived to be separate, fans still describe themselves as being part of a "larger J-rock community" that connects all fans together regardless of who their favourite band or J-rock genre may be. In this section, I look at how J-rock fans talk about the J-rock fan community and their experience of this community or communities.

There are rifts within the fan culture that lead to the formation of different groups within the J-rock fan culture, and certain types of fans may be excluded from various groups. For example, there are many people who like non-visual Japanese rock bands who would identify themselves as J-rock fans. Since so many of the communities that are labelled as J-rock related are in fact more centred on visual rock and 'indies' bands related to visual rock, a lot of J-rock fans who do not like visual rock have to splinter off into their own community. There are other points of separations from within the J-rock fandom that lead to multiple J-rock fan communities instead of one:

At this point in time, I think there are a number of small J-rock fan communities. For when I started listening to J-rock, there was more of a larger community where people knew each other, knew their websites, etc. But now that the community has grown in the last few

years, people have splintered off into their own little 'cells.' You have the people who only like VK or those who only like J-Indie. And instead of there being a website or websites that all J-music fans go to, they have their own separate sites that they frequent. So simply put, there isn't one community, just a bunch of small ones. (Male, 26, USA : July 30, 2006)

There are numerous rifts within the community on several lines. There is a rift between the new and old fans, largely based on annoyance with new fans 'butting in' and causing chaos in an established fanbase. There are those that listen to Major (label) bands and those that support Indies, your typical scenester 'I'm better than you because I know all about '...' and you don't even know they exist' argument. Overall though, the biggest rift would be between fanboy/girl culture and serious fans; people that are in it for the looks of the band and not their sound, etc. (Male, 23, USA : August 2, 2006)

Both of these fans belong to the group of people who have been into J-rock for six years or more and were part of the "old" J-rock community. These older fans describe their experience of a close-knit online community to differ from the interaction between fans today. Most of the fans that fit in the category of older fans are unsure of what exactly led to the "breakdown" of this close-knit community that seemed to begin sometime in 2000 in some of the major outlets for the community such as the now defunct X Japan mailing list and the Cohprog mailing list. There is definitely a sense among older fans that the J-rock fanbase used to all be part of one large community whereas the fanbase at its current state is more fragmented with many small communities.

Among fans, it is generally accepted that J-rock fan culture today is made up of many small communities that cater to specific bands or sub genres that exist within J-rock. However, a number of interview and questionnaire participants also felt that despite the many splintered communities, J-rock fans were all part of a symbolic larger community that everyone belonged to:

In general I would say that J-rock fans on the Internet tend to 'encounter' each other on several forums, but there are also many people who visit just one forum. My overall feeling is that there is a

large community to which 'we' belong, but there are also small communities consisting mainly of fans of a particular band. An example of this is Scape forum - a forum specifically for fans of the artists of Malice Mizer and their related solo projects/new bands. However, members of these small communities often participate also in larger forums such as Batsu. This question is a bit like a goldfish trying to judge the size of its pond - there's probably an ocean of J-rock fans 'out there' that I have never encountered online at all! Having said that, I think there's a kind of 'bond of kinship' between J-rock fans, whenever they meet, either online or in real life, due to being part of the same subculture. However, not all J-rock fans will get on, of course, which I think leads to some disappointments, for example when encountering rude or elitist J-rock fans. There's a subconscious expectation that 'J-rock fans should stick together' - even though certain 'types' of fans quite clearly look down on or dislike other 'types.' (Female, 27, UK: September 8, 2006)

It seems that the word 'community' is being used in different ways. When talking about older fans, people tend to say "it used to be one community" despite the fact that there were many places where fans would interact with each other. When fans talk about an "online community" or "many online communities," they mean a place of social interaction such as a forum, a mailing list or a Livejournal community. This differs from a sense of community or sense of belonging, which relates to 'imagined community,' a perception that one belongs to a group of J-rock fans despite never having interacted with or met everyone. To say that one is not part of a community does not mean that one does not identify as a J-rock fan.

Fans may like different styles of J-rock or different bands, but there is a connection between all J-rock fans that tie them together regardless of these differences. Though everyone might be a part of many small communities, some of these networks overlap, and one might see some familiar faces at another web forum or Livejournal community. As J-rock fans can be considered part of the same subculture, there are certain points of similarities that make it easy for people to establish some sort of bond quickly. This imagined connection with other J-rock fans is especially true for those who attend *anime* conventions as they try to search for

others like them amongst the people who only like *anime* but not J-rock.

In a sense, J-rock fan culture can be considered an 'imagined community,' a term originally coined by Anderson (1991) to describe the concept of national identity. In Chapter Two I suggested an alternative definition to Anderson's imagined community to include groups that are formed based on similar interests and hobbies. There are many points of disagreement and separation between different groups of J-rock fans. Despite this, there is a general feeling that if two J-rock fans met each other on the street, there will be enough things that they had in common to create a sense of bonding if they were to have a conversation. Though J-rock fans do not all participate in the same forums or are interested in the same bands, there is a feeling of camaraderie between fans, and fans feel connected to other J-rock fans that they may have never met before, online or in the physical world:

I think I am (a part of the community) because each time I see a J-rock fan it's easier to be friends with them because it's easier to have something in common so (there's) at least one thing to talk about. And so, if we start to talk and we don't have anything to say, we can start talking about J-rock, and there won't be any problems. (Claire: June 11, 2006)

There are, of course, some people for whom this sense of community is non-existent. When I asked Elaine what she thought about community, she replied, regarding Livejournal communities, "On the Internet when we use 'community,' I really think (it's) just something that you join. I don't tend to be really involved in online communities. I have online friends that share common interests, but I wouldn't say that we are part of a group of online friends or anything" (Elaine: June, 2006). Here, Elaine is using the word 'community' in terms of a virtual community. She clearly does not identify herself as being part of a group or community of J-rock fans on the Internet but does have friends on-line and off the Internet that she came to know through her interest in J-rock. Though she posts occasionally in the Livejournal

communities she had joined to post new lyric translations, she considers herself to be more of a lurker, or an observer, than an active participant. To Elaine, the Livejournal communities she had joined are only a reflection of her interests that appear on her profile page and are not an indication of any feeling of social connectivity with the members of said communities.

On the other hand, a large number of the people I interviewed said that they felt they belonged to a J-rock community or many J-rock communities, but many of these people also admitted that they were lurkers, people who mostly observed on-line interactions, who rarely participate in conversations, choosing to observe from afar. Many said that they remained lurkers because they felt that they did not have much to contribute to the conversation and others mentioned that they lurked because they disliked the kind of volatile environment found on certain fan communities. There were also long time fans who identified themselves as having been a part of one large J-rock community at one point in the past but now define themselves as not being a part of any community or being less active despite still keeping contacts and friendships with other J-rock fans.

Rheingold writes, "Although socializing in cyberspace is a shallow experience for many, others find there a place to share their most intimate feelings and seek support from invisible strangers" (2000 (1993): 328). Contact with other fans on the Internet is very important for some people, especially those who have to deal with ridicule for liking Japanese popular culture by those close to them or fans who cannot find any likeminded people in their locality:

I for sure feel a connection with other people who are into the same bands as I am. (It's) kind of an understanding, I guess? Since they are also interested in something that is so unknown and generally not popular with the general population that you have to interact with on a daily basis, I think everyone is glad to have their online friends from all over the world who feel the same way they do about J-rock and

experience the same un-acceptance by most people. (Alice: June 13, 2006)

These communities arise out of shared interests, not ethnic, cultural, nationalistic or political ties. J-rock communities online are “safe places” for some to retreat to where they can count on the support and understanding of others like them that share similar interests:

I think fans who listen to J-rock are sometimes drawn to it because they themselves may feel like they don't fit in so they search out this community of other fans and music that purposely other people won't understand right away, but in the community, they are, sheltered and cradled, and they have all these people to talk to about it. (Crystal: August 5, 2006)

By applying the concept of the ‘imagined community’ to J-rock fan culture, it becomes clearer why some of those who lurk on the online forums or add communities onto their Livejournal friend’s list without ever contributing still feel that they belong to a community or group:

I was really glad I have finally found friends online who could like the same music as me and not look at me like I’m crazy or anything. ... Someone will eventually find you and listen to you. (Serena: August 4, 2006)

Online communities are places not only for social interaction and discussion with a large group of people, but are also a way for fans to expand their social networks as they try to find individuals that they can get along with. Communities are important, because they give fans a way to find support with others that share their interest. But the hostile environment sometimes found within virtual communities is detrimental to creating a feeling of belonging and togetherness and makes some people who feel that they are less knowledgeable reluctant to participate. This can be seen in Alice’s observation about the kind of participation and atmosphere in a Livejournal community featuring an *oshare-kei* band called Alice Nine:

I wouldn't say that it is a really tight community. A lot of people just watch and don't really contribute. It is usually the same handful of people contributing most things. ... In the community, usually people are fairly distanced and kind of watch what they say so they don't get rained on by someone who has a different opinion. It is friendly, but not overly so. It seems most people kind of keep a certain distance. Whereas with actual friends you generally say whatever you want. If they don't like it either, they can deal with it or leave. (Alice: June 13, 2006)

Virtual communities give fans a base to come back to again and again and, in the case of Livejournal, a way to show the world the kinds of things that they identify with and interest them. But the relationships that really matter are the ones with their friends. Despite claiming to feel they belong to a "larger community of J-rock fans," often times this feeling of belonging is sustained by the social networks that are created by participation or observation of J-rock communities. These social networks tend to be important even for fans that do not consider themselves part of the J-rock fandom. Many of the interchanges with online friends take place one on one privately through online chat programs like AIM and MSN messenger or through email. These private conversations are safe-havens away from the dangerous environment in the public virtual communities where backlash and negative reactions from others may result when a controversial or unpopular opinion is voiced. There is a distinction between a public and a private sphere, but both are equally important and provide J-rock fans with different kinds of support and interaction.

Participation in the Community

In Peter Kollock's framework for understanding why people contribute to communities, Kollock looks at contribution to online communities in terms of costs and benefits (1999). There are several motivators that include: contributing information to receive help at a later time, to gain prestige and recognition within the

community, a sense of efficacy connected to the perception and desire to change the environment, or a desire to contribute for the general good of the people in the community (1999: 227-228). A virtual community is active for as long as its members contribute, either for altruistic or selfish reasons. There are certain qualities that tend to be identified with 'good' and 'bad' J-rock fan communities:

I was part of a community where we all got along so well that we could easily laugh at rumours, discuss strange issues, and basically get along. To me, this sense of support was what made us a community; how we networked and were very close to one another because of one common interest. (Female, 23, USA: July 29, 2006).

I tend to think of communities in terms of 'good communities' and 'bad communities.' Good online communities are the ones where the members are helpful when a new person, or anyone really, asks a question, instead of flaming them for asking a 'stupid question.' When everyone gets along, are reasonably polite, and a good number of members are fairly knowledgeable in the subject area they claim, I will consider them a 'real' community. They just give off that feeling of friendliness and acceptance a community should. (Female, 24, Canada: July 29, 2006)

A lot of these criteria are dependent on the conduct of the members in the community itself. Most important are members who are respectful of others and knowledgeable about J-rock. Without respect for other members, as some fans can be very opinionated, discussions can quickly become 'flame wars,' vicious arguments in which people are purposely hostile and insulting, leading to so-called 'online drama.' Virtual communities have been abandoned or restructured because of flame wars. Also, active and contributing members within the community are very important. Without people contributing to the community, the community will slowly fade away. There are many Livejournal communities I have observed that are an example of this. There is no active discussion, and any new post to the community, most likely an advertisement for another related community or an introduction post might get very few comments. These are examples of virtual communities that people may add onto

their friends' list without feeling any involvement or commitment to.

This detachment or disengagement from interacting with other fans in a public forum is partly related to the hostile feeling that some fans attribute to the larger fan community and J-rock online communities. Some people say that they dislike J-rock fans because of flame wars and other kinds of hostile interactions. It seems that this is becoming more common as there are more and more online J-rock communities.

The older virtual communities, because they were so close-knit, had very clear boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' fans that was based on factors such as accumulation of official merchandise and knowledge about both the music and the bands. Those that did not conform to these criteria were sometimes ridiculed. One of the reasons that "the J-rock community" splintered into smaller communities had to do with these boundaries as newer fans who could not fit in with the established group created their own virtual communities.

However, with these new communities, some of the long time fans noticed there was a difference between 'old' and 'new' fans:

Around 2000, 2001 it just seemed like there were new communities cropping up all over the place instead of people sticking together like before. It's hard to say exactly (why). Maybe the 'new' people started to feel like they were still treated as newbies after being in the fandom for years? They (the communities) seem to be more band specific now. It seems a lot less technical now and a lot more fangirly, but I could be looking at the wrong communities. People used to discuss the influences for individual songs, or how this band came to sound this way, and what they thought inspired this music, etc. (Diana: June 15, 2006).

Like Diana, many other older fans describe the newer group of J-rock fans to contain more people that are more "casual" fans that only like J-rock on a "superficial level." It seems that the focus has certainly changed as the J-rock fanbase splintered into smaller groups online. Batsu.org is a large forum with 12,000 members that, unlike many online J-rock communities today, is dedicated to a wide variety of J-rock genres

and bands. There is little active discussion about the music itself, about potential influences, both cultural and musical, and techniques of the musicians. Compared to the previous group of fans, these type of discussion are much harder to find and are not as abundant. A lot of the current conversation online does not delve deep into understanding, critiquing, and dissecting J-rock. There are many forum threads that contain requests asking for mp3s, lyrics or photos with some topics about a certain band's current activities, looks, and musical releases that are not in depth conversations. Forums like Batsu.org and many Livejournal communities are less about theoretical discussions, dissecting the genre, and comparing bands with each other. Instead, they are more oriented towards providing information about the band's activities, links to media downloads, and a support group for J-rock fans.

People are contributing to communities by offering media downloads, sometimes without any expectation of getting anything in return. However, this leads to a group of people who download music and videos who do not care to learn more about the bands or purchase the music, values that had been considered very important before. These values still continue to be important for some J-rock fans, but there are a larger population of people for whom these things do not matter, and they do not base their identification with the J-rock fan community on these values.

The older fans seemed to have more active and lengthy discussions that dealt with topics such as looking at the changes and different developments of J-rock over time. They were interested in defining the qualities of J-rock from looking at what influences it draws from and discussing what bands were the most influential for J-rock bands today. Many of the fans that made up the older community were very knowledgeable and willing to contribute to the conversation, but many have since moved on from the J-rock fandom to other kinds of Japanese music or have decided to

move away from the public community to semi-private circles of close-knit friends. This is not to say that later fans of J-rock are not knowledgeable and capable of discussion. The lack of discussion is perhaps related to the separation of the J-rock fandom into smaller groups and the intimidating atmosphere found in some communities. To a lesser extent, the difficulty people generally have with describing music structure is probably another factor. Categories such as 'fangirl' and 'elitist' highlight the pressure connected to interaction in J-rock online communities.

Fan Hierarchies

The terms 'fangirl' and 'elitists' are both used to describe categories of fans who lie at the edge of the J-rock fan culture. These constructed cultural boundaries and hierarchies part of J-rock fan culture can be witnessed both in virtual communities and in face-to-face interaction with other fans. Oftentimes, in order to distance themselves from these 'negative' stereotypes, fans use humour or deny the importance of fan hierarchies. The competition that arises between fans is something that can be found in any group of people and suggests the importance and existence of a group structure. However, from the perspective of some fans, the hierarchies are counter-productive and actually impede community feeling instead of strengthening it.

A lot of conflicts within the community appear between long time fans and younger fans who came into the J-rock fan culture at a point when the visual rock and 'indies' scene was starting to decline, some might argue, in terms of creativity and innovation. Fan activities such as cosplay and fan fiction are important for some J-rock fans as a way of externalizing their fan interest and feeling closer to the musicians, and people do grade and evaluate others based on the quality of these works, but not everyone is involved in these activities or interested in them. People

can gain cultural capital within a community through fan activities, but when speaking of J-rock fans as a whole, it is perhaps more important to look at cultural capital in terms of knowledge, experience at concerts and in Japan, and accumulation of merchandise, including official CDs and DVDs.

Almost all of the J-rock fans I encountered already had some exposure or interest in Japanese popular culture, mostly *anime* or *manga*, before they started listening to J-pop or J-rock. Most became interested through Japanese *anime* theme songs or *seiyuu* music sung by *anime* voice actors like Hayashibara Megumi. Various well-known J-rock bands have also done theme songs for *anime* such as L'arc~en~Ciel's opening song for *Rurouni Kenshin*, a TV series that was extremely popular in North America or the use of an X Japan song in an *anime* movie adaptation of a *manga* series titled 'X' by an immensely popular group of *manga* artists called CLAMP. The connection between J-rock and *anime* has always been there, even in Japan (see Koizumi 2003; Morota 2003). As such, it was a natural transition for some North American J-rock fans to bring their musical interest with them to the *anime* conventions that they were probably already attending before becoming interested in Japanese music.

As Japanese music has become an important part of conventions as more musical guests and related programming and merchandise are being offered, J-rock fans are becoming more visible at conventions though they still are a minority compared to the majority of people who are only interested in *anime* and *manga*. With this trend, there are also more people who become J-rock fans through conventions. This has caused some problems within the community as people draw boundaries between good and bad fans and label others using words with negative connotations such as 'fangirls' or 'fanboys,' which is sometimes applied to people

who attend conventions. This partly also has to do with the rift between fans concerning J-rock bands being invited as musical guests to *anime* conventions and the impression that the average age of convention attendees has dropped in recent years with some cons becoming more “family-friendly.”

A fangirl is considered to be someone who places more emphasis on the image of the bands over the actual quality of the music. Though there are also fanboys, people typically talk about fangirls as people new to J-rock and who are usually female and in their teens. They are depicted as obsessive, unknowledgeable, and give outsiders the image of J-rock music, in particular visual rock, as being the domain of ‘teenyboppers.’ Almost all of the J-rock fans I encountered emphasized the importance of the music over the image. Many of these people made this point in order to distance themselves from being labelled as fangirls. Often times the contradiction of ‘fangirling’ over how a musician looks, and being a ‘serious fan’ who likes the music, is inescapable, and some fans even call themselves fangirls in a show of self-deprecating humour. The contradiction is balanced out by accepting one’s tendency to lapse into fangirl moments while still holding a strong grip on things that ‘bad’ fans supposedly ignore, such as respect for the band, knowledge of the band’s releases and music, and support of the band through purchasing official products:

A good fan in my opinion would be someone whose main attention is on the band's career, their music, their talent, their news and actual news, and not just rumours. Of course, fangirling comes in too, but not let the fangirling get ahead of the other things stated. I feel that a fan should accept the band's movements from one era to another. ... And, also, I think a good fan would probably also notice the Jrocker's personality. You know, care about the Jrock on a personal level, as in, respect their wishes, consider what they're feeling in particular situations and so on. I find this extremely crucial when it comes to meeting them during a live or just meeting them generally. But, the one thing that pisses me off the most about a ‘fan’ in particular would be the attitude they carry when they talk about their ‘supposedly’ favourite band ... the type of fan that has NO idea what the band is about, doesn't CARE about who the members are as long as they're

good looking. Very self-centered when it comes to the band and is a total fangirl, you know the type that goes, 'OMG, so and so loves me, he's so cute, he's so this and that' and also has no respect for the band what-so-ever. (Leslie: August 31, 2006)

Interestingly, Beth, who became a J-rock fan early in the history of the fan culture in North America, observed that because there was a lack of information about the bands and the members, the online fan community differed back in 1997:

Back in the days, the only bands that any of us knew about were major label ones. And we didn't... we didn't even know much about them. We didn't know anything about the bands, the band members' personalities, often we didn't know what the names of the members were, how long the bands have been together, what kinds of discographies they had. We really didn't know, so there wasn't as much fangirly stuff about you know, like, 'Oh my god! What kind of cake does so and so like?' We didn't do any of that. We didn't even know who so-and-so was. All we had was a tape and no picture at all. And I think there were more- it was a more even distribution of female and male fans at the very beginning. ... I guess it was the way that people were exposed. I mean, back then, people would hear about the music because, you know, they were listening to *anime* and liked the theme song, and they would find out more by that artists, so music always came first. ... But later on, fans became introduced to J-rock, and especially visual-kei, and pictures they would see online and at anime conventions, cosplaying- or a lot of fans who were in school would print out pictures of the artists and stick them on notebooks, and actually I think a lot of people discovered bands that way, just from seeing pictures on their friend's binders. So, as time went on, it became more of an image that would catch people's eyes first. (Beth: January 19, 2004)

According to Beth, with such a dearth of information about J-rock bands, it was not even possible for people to be fangirls. It seems that fangirls only started to come into being as more media like videos and magazine scans and Internet use at home became more accessible. Beth described the earlier community as having many people who considered themselves to be serious music fans who have since moved on from the scene and disappeared entirely. This development is similar to what happened with the visual cosplay fans in Japan. As visual rock gained popularity, more female fans coming from an *anime*, *manga*, and/or videogame background started to do cosplay,

and many of these fans perceived the band members as characters rather than real people (Koizumi 2003). Many of these Japanese girls became interested in the visual rock image and emulated it through cosplay before they had even heard the music; this shift corresponds closely to what J-rock fans have described as the North American fangirl who places the image over the music.

Representing the flip side of fangirls are elitists who are usually described as being overly protective of 'their bands' and worried about their favourite band "going mainstream" and losing their underground edge. They are also purported to like obscure indie groups for the specific purpose of showing how knowledgeable and hardcore they are, and may flaunt ownership of J-rock merchandise, concert experiences, trips to Japan or close interactions with musicians as a way of separating themselves from other fans.

The fangirls and elitists represent cultural extremes within the fandom. Some elitists, though not all, have high cultural capital and perhaps social capital as well, but access to these status symbols also puts them in a higher position that gives an air of authority that other fans dislike. Generally speaking, elitists are considered to be those that take themselves too seriously. On the other hand, fangirls are thought of just as 'annoying' and detrimental to community growth as they have such low cultural capital, with many of them being new fans who know very little or nothing about the J-rock scene. There are those who choose to lurk on online communities because they are afraid of being put in one category or another or tired of the antics engaged in by people in both of these extreme categories. As mentioned earlier, there are some long time fans who do have access to information about activities in Japan by having been there or are living there at the moment. They are reluctant to participate in public forums even if they personally feel that they are not elitist. The

ideal fan found on a J-rock community seems to be one that lies in between the two extremes and has a sense of humour about their fandom:

I love jrock_humor because they're the J-rock fans that I love, because they are the people that love it for the music, love it for the people, love it for everything, and they're willing to make fun of it. They don't have a giant stick up their butt saying, you know, I'm going to be elitist and not like you. (Elizabeth: August 4, 2006)

New fans tend to be labelled fangirls whereas long time fans are described as elitist. Fans try to alleviate the kind of stress caused by these labels by trying to de-emphasize the importance of cultural and social capital in the community. Despite this, in addition to having an interest in the music, buying the official products is still considered very important even if it seems that some fans on some particular forums are not doing it. I had a conversation with someone who had recently become a fan of J-rock, and he felt embarrassed by the fact that he only had one or two J-rock CDs in his collection. He tried to cover his embarrassment but telling me that he was planning to buy more CDs in the dealer's room at the convention that day. There is pressure to conform to the notion that one should support the artists by buying the official merchandise instead of only downloading or buying bootlegged products as a great number of people who consider themselves to be more than casual fans prescribe to this importance. Owning the official CD or DVD becomes a legitimizing factor to prove to others and to oneself that one is a real fan. There is a lot of pressure coming from within the greater community to prove to others that one is a 'real fan' or a 'good fan,' but some people try to devalue this by pretending not to care or using humour to deal with the pressure.

'Fangirls' and 'elitists' are an example of the competition and hierarchy evident within J-rock fan culture. Some fans try to separate themselves from these categories as they try to prove to others that they are 'good' fan and try to move up

the hierarchy. However, this competition provokes many fans to remove themselves from significant participation in the online communities. Many knowledgeable fans, including those who have had a lot of experience in Japan or are living in Japan and have access to the activities of the band, turn inwards to their established circles of friends instead of sharing their knowledge with the wider fanbase. This is because they are afraid of other fans who might interpret their actions as bragging and might become jealous or hostile. Some of these fans were or are recognizable within the fandom, but some have decided to be picky about who they choose to interact with and rarely post publicly. Fans that seldom participate use online communities as a way to build new social networks and move their private conversations away from the public environment of the web forum or the Livejournal community.

Despite the issues some people have with the online community, interaction with other fans on the Internet is still an important part of their life with many forming real and significant friendships or relationships with others online from an interest in J-rock. The social networks that can be formed with others through online communities and interaction at conventions and live concerts for some people gives them more meaning and a stronger bond to their own interest in J-rock and continues to give fans the support they need. Fan hierarchy and categories such as 'fangirls' and 'elitists' may drive people away from participation in virtual communities, but the social networks they have formed by being a part of these online communities keep fans connected to the larger J-rock fan culture even if they choose to move away from partaking in public discussions. Through its short history, North American J-rock fan culture has undergone many changes. But the camaraderie between J-rock fans remains strong, and J-rock online communities continue to play an important role in how fans construct their identity and meaningful social relationships.

Chapter Six: Commercialization of J-rock in North America

Ever since 2002, when Duel Jewel was the first J-rock band to play at an *anime* convention, there have been more and more Japanese music acts performing or holding promotional events at *anime* conventions. Despite there being a J-rock fanbase throughout the United States and Canada, companies are currently focused on developing a market in the United States, with most not considering entering into the Canadian market at this time. Either way, *anime* conventions are a safe way for promoters to test out bands with audiences that are already familiar with and receptive to anything connected to Japanese culture. Some J-rock fans dislike seeing bands perform at conventions, whereas some fans see no problem with this development as it was because of *anime* conventions that they found out about J-rock in the first place. Regardless of what fans think, this development will continue and is an example of how J-rock is becoming more commercialized in North America. J-rock in North America existed as a fan culture on the Internet that was not heavily connected to any corporate structure. Now that businesses have taken interest in marketing J-rock in North America, fans must deal with the double edged sword of being able to see their favourite band perform while losing some of the esteem of being part of something no one else knew about. To examine how J-rock is being imported through official channels is to examine a subculture that is in the process of becoming mass marketed. Some fans try to resist this by denouncing bands that play at conventions, whereas others try to control how bands are marketed by entering into the industry themselves.

As *anime* conventions have branched out to include other aspects of Japanese and Asian culture alongside *anime* and *manga*, Japanese music has become a regular part of programming at conventions and alongside industry guests to the cons like directors, scriptwriters, and voice actors are also music guests, many invited from

Japan to play at the convention. With this expansion, Japanese music fans, particularly J-rock fans, have become more visible at conventions in the past few years as a number of activities at conventions feature Japanese music. These include J-pop/J-rock rooms dedicated to showing music videos and concert videos, cosplay contests specifically for J-rock cosplay, panels related to Japanese music, and live concerts. It was in part through the effort of Japanese music fans who ran these kinds of events at conventions that more people became interested in Japanese music, which eventually culminated in Japanese and North American music acts holding concerts at conventions. Convention events offer existing J-rock fans a way to meet up with other fans and potentially create new friendships. For these fans, the interactions with others experienced at the conventions are important, and many of the social contacts made at conventions are carried onto interactions on the Internet. The closed environment of a convention fosters a feeling of togetherness and belonging within the space of just two or three days:

Something about being at a con just feels awesome. You can kind of be something you usually aren't in every day life. I guess it is kind of an escape from reality. (Alice: June 13, 2006)

The experience described here is not unique to *anime* conventions and J-rock fans but can also be found with science fiction fans, comic book fans, etc. It is interesting that certain J-rock fans, as music fans, still continue to attend *anime* conventions as a way of meeting other fans even though most music fans of other genres do not gather in similar spaces. Even the first J-rock convention, Jrock Connection, first held in Santa Clara, CA in 2005, seems to have modeled itself after a traditional *anime* convention with panels, cosplay contests, a dealer's room, and of course, concerts.

In North America, J-rock continues to be connected in some way to *anime* fandom or at least, *anime* conventions. Before J-rock artists started coming to the

United States to play concerts, one of the only ways for a large number of J-rock fans from different localities to meet outside of the Internet was through *anime* conventions. Considering that a large number of fans came to know about J-rock through their interest in *anime* and *manga*, which eventually led them to search out other aspects of Japanese culture, it was a natural progression that J-rock fans would start to gather at *anime* conventions and create panels and activities within the convention that catered to their specific interest. There are J-rock fans who are also *anime* fans, but many who may or may not still like *anime* and *manga* might not identify themselves as part of the *anime* fandom. Within this group, there are quite a number of J-rock fans who want to distance themselves from *anime* fans, and it is one of the things that has contributed to the split within the fandom. Because the J-rock fan communities have mostly existed through online interaction, and because it is only in the past four years that fans have actually been able to see their favourite bands in concert in their own country, the hierarchy seen in the Japanese livehouse scene is not present. Rules of conduct and behaviour between musicians and fans are not as well established, and some fans are not sure of how to act and might breach the expected norms found in the Japanese fan culture, acting in ways that might label them as 'fangirls' and giving J-rock fans who go to *anime* conventions a bad name.

Some J-rock fans dislike it when J-rock bands perform at conventions, which some believe connects J-rock too heavily to the *anime* fandom and detracts others from seeing J-rock as a legitimate music genre. Some dislike the methods some promoters use, such as holding auctions for tickets that allow fans to get a chance to eat dinner with a J-rock musician, essentially commodifying the individual musician and the musician's time. The reaction to J-rock bands playing at conventions have ranged from supportive to questioning to outright anger. Some fans do not see any

problems to have J-rock bands play at conventions as they have become inclusive of other aspects of Japanese culture in recent years:

Anime conventions have become havens for other things in Japanese culture such as tea ceremony, *taiko*, Japanese street fashion and J-rock as well so I think it is a smart to combine those interest and have bands playing at conventions - it can also expose a bands music to many people who may not already be fans but are susceptible to listen to it. (female, 24, USA: September 7, 2006)

There are fans that are happy to see their favourite artists come to North America to play, regardless of how they do it. And then there are fans that lament seeing J-rock bands that have no connection to *anime* continuing to appear at conventions. Yet, fans continue to give immense support to these bands that come to North America to play, and some put aside their prejudices to come to see their favourite bands at conventions. Some J-rock fans raise objections against conventions because the early bands to perform were often relegated to playing in hotel conference rooms, hardly the ideal place to hold a rock concert. But this is changing as convention organizers book actual clubs and concert venues near to where the convention is held to give bands a place to play that is properly equipped to handle a music concert.

It was not until 2004 when L'arc~en~Ciel, a band that has met with mainstream and chart success in Japan, performed at Otakon in Baltimore, MD, that it seemed that J-rock bands and their promoters began to realize that they already had an established fanbase that was wishing for them to come to North America and that knew about their music and liked the band's personalities. Various businesses have been established in order to cater to this newly recognized market. Whatever opinions fans may have, as support for these artists at conventions have generally been positive and some organizers are making an effort to improve the experience and streamline the process, this development will perhaps continue for many years to come as Japanese music becomes an integral part of some conventions. Companies such as

Tofu Records, Freewill America, and Jhouserock involved with the promoting and distribution of J-rock related merchandise have continued to focus on *anime* conventions as their main avenue of promotion for these musical acts from Japan. Tofu Records has concentrated on appealing to *anime* fans and creating an online community with a forum located on their website as a means to market the artists on their label. In recent years, Tofu Records has moved to other promotion strategies, which include autograph sessions at stores, like Tower Records, and concerts not held at conventions. These companies including those in Europe like Gan-shin in France and Germany, have repackaged CDs and DVDs for audiences outside of Japan that sometimes contain new packaging with translated and transliterated lyrics sold for half the price of a Japanese import. In North America, distribution to brick and mortar stores like HMV or Best Buy have been spotty at best, even at some retail locations in major cities, and sales seem to mostly be through online retail, special order or dealer's rooms at conventions.

Some fans feel that by having J-rock bands whose music has had no connection to *anime* play at conventions limits the band and prevents them from reaching out to a wider audience and many of their fans:

I find it weird. ... They know that people will attend their concerts but, it's not actually their fans because people who are interested in *anime* tend to be interested in anything that's Japanese. Well, not everyone, but a lot of them do, so yes they will see the band, but I fear that the band will have a wrong impression of how fans of rock really are because they don't have the right target audience. It's not cheating, I don't know, I don't want to imply something. (Elaine: June 11, 2006)

Elaine identifies a concern that many fans have: that playing at *anime* conventions means promoters and bands are targeting the *anime* audience, an audience that is being targeted because it is one that is already established and familiar with some aspects of Japanese culture and language. While this may work in the short term and

provide some kind of profit for these companies, it might not provide promoters with a long term, larger audience for a band that may want to be taken seriously for their music and not seen as a novelty act. Some fans expressed this sentiment as well:

I would prefer to see a band in a real music setting ie. concert hall, live house, etc. Seeing a band in a venue with crazed *anime* fans who don't know how to act doesn't appeal to me. Another thing, is that pandering to *anime* fans may guarantee you an audience at this point but limits you to a niche market and risks you being labelled as an '*anime*' band. There have been Japanese artists who've been successful in touring and selling here in the states without tapping anime fans. (male, 26, USA: July 30, 2006)

Japanese music artists have been playing concerts in North America for ages now, and many acts have performed outside of Japan in Western countries and continue to do so. A lot of the groups that have been touring heavily in North America include bands like Mono and the Polysics which are not visual rock bands or groups that a wide number of J-rock fans may take interest in. These and others, like Pizzicato Five and Shonen Knife, have targeted North-American fans open to new and interesting music. Unlike most mainstream J-pop artists that try to break into the North American market, these groups have no intention of aiming for mainstream and/or chart success that popular J-pop artists like Matsuda Seiko and Dreams Come True had targeted for when they made their US debut. As they continue to tour in North America, these bands build a kind of credibility with the music press and music fans that might not be interested in Japanese popular culture or connected to that fandom in any way. In recent years, more J-rock bands have decided to forego the *anime* convention and take the more traditional route of performing at clubs.

One such band is Dir en grey, which had a great cult following in North America before they ever left Japan. Dir en grey started out as a visual band playing the indie circuit in Japan. Their first mini album, *Missa*, reached the Oricon charts and influenced a whole generation of copy cat bands that tried to emulate the

screamy and dark sounding songs found on the CD. Their later work veered away from the visual rock 'sound' they originally influenced and moved towards more American influences from genres such as heavy metal, nu metal, and metal core. In 2006, they played a three-city tour in New York, Los Angeles, and Austin. The tickets sold out online in a matter of minutes without the help of any promotion besides word of mouth between fans on the Internet. In the same year, they joined Korn and other bands as part of the Family Values tour, and they headlined a North American tour at the beginning of 2007. Dir en grey remains one of the most popular bands within the North American fanbase despite losing a number of long time fans who disliked the direction of their later music. Along with groups like X Japan, Luna Sea, L'arc-en-ciel, and Malice Mizer, they are one of the bands that most people first encounter before becoming J-rock fans.

As more bands continue to perform outside Japan, be it at a convention or elsewhere, and achieve some kind of success in North America, J-rock fans begin to lose some of the underground status that was an attraction for some of them:

There's definitely a strong pride among J-rock fans that we're supporting the artists. We have very, very strong passions, very strong bond with other fans, but we are almost completely separate from the American mainstream. You know, it's like, we're rock fans, but we don't watch MTV. We're rock fans who only recently have been able to go to concerts. And, I think as the American industries notice this passion, they want to step into it. They want to market it, obviously. And so, they bring these bands over, and they make money. And the passion at almost every J-rock show I have been to has been unreal. The earliness with- as with people line up, the passion that they convey, because they know they'll never know when these bands are going to come again is really amazing, and at same time, we're losing our pride, because right now especially among Dir en Grey fans, I have to say, partly because their fanbase is unlike any other fanbase. But, our passion that used to be a secret- it's like the secret has been released, and we feel a little bit less special now. We're losing a little bit. That pride of being super, super underground. You know, you lose a little bit when they get on Fuse TV and MTV. Or you know, when they're in Hot Topic. I feel the initial pain that a lot of fans have. (Cheryl: August 5, 2006)

The issues that Cheryl has mapped out here indicate the double-edged sword that fans encounter as more J-rock artists come to play outside Japan. Even the fans that disliked to see bands play at *anime* conventions were supportive of bands coming to North America to play; they just disliked the kind of practices involved with concerts and events held at conventions. The majority of fans I encountered had a positive reaction to the prospect of more J-rock bands playing in North America, though some are aware of the reality that for most bands, this is not a possibility or even an option. Some people do not have the means to go to Japan to attend concerts, so having bands come and play in their own country is the only way that they could ever have the live concert experience. Fans are, in a way, hungry to interact with their favourite bands after listening and watching them from afar for years, yet when those bands reach out to audiences outside Japan and more people know about them, some fans feel that they “lose” something in the process as the “secret”, as Cheryl puts it, “is let out.” Dir en grey fans are concerned that their success will go hand in hand with them becoming mainstream, selling out, becoming less interesting and/or attracting people who call themselves fans who know nothing about the band.

Despite not wanting to identify with the visual rock genre from which they originated, Dir en grey are in effect trailblazers for future J-rock bands that are considering going to the US, and if they do well, they will pave the path for more J-rock bands to attempt the North American market in the future. Dir en grey is really one of the first J-rock bands to be getting this kind of ‘wide’ coverage through ‘mainstream’ mass media outlets for music such as MTV and American music journals catering to general music fans and not Japanese culture enthusiasts. They are doing the kinds of things that are expected of any band from any other country wanting to enter the North American market. For people who are not interested in Dir

en grey, they have not raised this kind of concern about their favourite group becoming commercial or more mainstream in the same way Dir en grey fans do. For those that dislike *anime* conventions, the concerns that they have are ones connected to the commodification of band members through the auctioning of their time and ethical and moral concerns such as bands not getting the kind of respect they deserve both from promoters and fans at conventions.

Some of the companies involved in promoting bands through conventions recruit willing fans to be part of the street team for artists and events sponsored by the company. By participating in such promotional activities, some fans are able to form some connections to those within the industry, which may lead to a larger role in promotion, organizing events, dealing with the musical artist, which may eventually lead to a career with the promotion company. There are fans who actually start their own ventures related to J-rock which take them into the industry side of things, even though they themselves still remain fans. Examples include the Japanese rock magazine Purple Sky, launched last year, and Nip Radio, a Montreal-based college radio program that started five years ago with programming centring around a wide array of J-rock bands. Some activities that started out as simply hobbies, like running a fan site or actively promoting Japanese music through a radio show or going through the process of inviting bands to play at a convention, may take a more serious tone and eventually lead to a potential career related to the music industry.

Purple Sky is a full colour quarterly magazine created by fans for fans. Brian Stewart, editor of Purple Sky, describes the magazine as “us (the creators) as fans creating an intimate setting for the fans and for the people that are coming into the fandom to relate to the music in a language they understand” (August, 2006). The staff of Purple Sky want to retain their identity of being fans, which helps them to

identify with their target audience at the same time balancing the professionalism required to deal with record companies and artists. Some of the magazine staff previously created their own websites about Japanese music. Many of these sites, such as Stewart's Centigrade-J, a lyrics translation site, were quite popular, and they had some kind of recognizable status within the online J-rock fanbase. Art director Linsl Schrader adds, "There (is) a legitimizing factor in a print magazine that, as something that requires a lot of work to produce as opposed to a website, it becomes a reality and not an ephemeral thing" (August, 2006). There are some fans that want to take their involvement in the fan community a step further by becoming involved in the process of production or in other jobs related to the industry. Fans try to work with and influence the industry from within. The decision to create a print magazine came out of the desire to create something that could be considered more legitimate than an Internet news site. By trying to promote Japanese music through more traditional channels such as radio and print media, fans involved in the industry are also legitimizing the J-rock fanbase and giving fans a 'voice' by supposedly working with companies to let them know the concerns of fans. These fans are developing official social capital whilst formalizing the consumption of J-rock by creating radio shows or magazines that legitimizes J-rock as a subculture in North America.

J-rock fan culture has already evolved from a close-knit virtual community to consisting of many different communities. As the J-rock fanbase continues to grow outside Japan, J-rock becomes more mass-marketed and well-known in North America. The differences between long-time fans and newer fans will become even more apparent, and the imagined J-rock community will be challenged and changed in the process.

Chapter Seven: The Imagined Japan

Mike Featherstone writes that globalization is about “the sense of global compression in which the world is increasingly regarded as ‘one place’” in which “it becomes much more difficult for nation-states to opt out of, or avoid the consequences of being drawn together into a progressively tighter figuration through the increasing volume and rapidity of the flows of money, goods, people, information, technology, and images” (1995: 81). In the case of J-rock fans, it is because of cultural globalization, or the transmission of cultural media across national boundaries, that they were able to identify themselves as J-rock fans in the first place.

This chapter is dedicated to looking at the issue of how globalization is affecting how people construct their self-identity and how consumption of a media that originated from a different country shapes the perception that people have of that country. I also explore what other scholars have written about the perception of Japan in other countries, Western and Asian, in order to frame my discussion of J-rock fans’ perspective concerning Japan. Finally, I look at the consequences of this identification with a Japanese youth culture for those living in North America in terms of their identity and future goals and dreams.

Japanese ‘Soft Power’ in Asia and North America

In order to understand how consumption of Japanese popular culture affects the perception J-rock fans have of Japanese culture and society, it is important to examine the stereotypical view of Japan from the context of Western and Asian cultures. Aoyagi writes that the Western image of Japan is one that tends to “emphasize images of traditional Japan, or a more Asian Japan, in their symbolic procession: images of samurai, sushi, geisha, and so forth. ... In contrast, the Japan that other Asian countries look at, in terms of the motif-dissemination point, is in fact

the aspect of modernity found in Japan” (2005: 251). Japan enters into Asian markets with a sense that they are representing for all of Asia a country that has successfully adapted to modernism. Japan perceives itself as a messenger for modernity by ‘teaching’ other Asian countries business and production processes in order to bring them into modernity. On the other hand, in North America and Western Europe, there is a ‘self-orientalizing’ discourse in which Japan believes it must edit and ‘localize’ its media and the portrayal of Japan in order to be accepted by Westerners.

In an article looking at the Pokémon phenomenon in the United States, Joseph Tobin writes, “The Japanese belief in their cultural uniqueness, coupled with their ambivalence with being consumed by foreigners, can lead to a certain awkwardness and hesitancy in marketing their culture to outsiders” (2004: 260-261). The “foreigners” described by Tobin here are not Chinese or Korean audiences but Westerners from America and Europe. Some Japanese *anime* companies themselves have been noted to demand certain changes whenever their product is marketed to a Western market. These include name changes to censoring nudity, especially when the media is to be public television as opposed to being marketed to the niche market of established *anime* fans. In what Iwabuchi has labelled as a “self-orientalizing discourse in Japan,” connected to sort of anxiety or fear that foreigners are not open to understand the peculiarities of Japanese culture and may view Japan in a negative manner, is a process of self-censoring or self-editing, if you will, of cultural products when they reach overseas markets in Western countries (2004: 58). This sentiment is not entirely unfounded as demonstrated by the large number of J-rock fans who discuss the ridicule from their peers and others around them that are unable to understand their interest in Japanese cultural products. Regardless, this process of ‘glocalization,’ or reimagining or restructuring of the original product for local

markets outside the original context in which the product was created, is a well voiced lament by enthusiasts already familiar with Japanese culture. These people usually consider the localized versions of *anime* and *manga* to be inferior to a translation that follows closer to the original Japanese source material. Many fans of *anime* and *manga* are quite concerned with this issue of authenticity and the preservation of the experience of these media products as similar to the original Japanese version. For some, the fact that *anime* and *manga* are from Japan is very important. Even looking at how Japanese popular culture has penetrated American mainstream culture from Hollywood remakes of popular Japanese horror films like *The Ring* or *The Grudge* to pop singer Gwen Stefani's obsession with Harajuku and Japanese youth fashion, Japan has somehow become 'cool' in recent years.

Similar to how Pokémon and other *anime* broadcast on local and cable TV is "localized" for a North American audience by being dubbed in English and heavily edited to remove any traces of Japanese cultural references that might be considered confusing for children, even mainstream Japanese pop artists are "localized" when they try to enter into an American market by having their lyrics translated and their image changed. For example, Matsuda Seiko, a popular idol singer from the 1980s, was turned into an R&B singer when she released an album in the US. Other J-pop artists like Utada Hikaru and Dreams Come True have all tried to enter the mainstream music industry in the US but their endeavours were considered commercial and artistic failures. In addition, some of these albums had poor marketing and distribution in the US, making it difficult to reach the wide audience the promoters were probably aiming for. Though mainstream J-pop artists have not had much success, artists targeting a more limited audience in North America by catering to serious music fans instead of a mass audience have done relatively well.

Examples include groups like Puffy (renamed PuffyAmiYumi to avoid confusion with rap artist Puffy), Pizzicato Five, and Polysics, who rarely had to compromise the original style or language of their music yet were still able to find a niche market and strong following in the United States and other Western countries with music fans who may or may not be Japanese enthusiasts.

Douglas McGray, in an article for the magazine *Foreign Policy* (2002), discusses Japan's 'gross national cool' (GNC) or how, through 'soft power,' centring on media and commercial commodities, Japan is exerting an impact on Western countries. This power comes from the recent phenomenon in mainstream North American culture in which all things Japanese, from fashion to *sushi*, have come to be considered as signifiers of 'cool'. McGray writes, "In fact, in cultural terms at least, Japan has become one of a handful of perfect globalization nations (along with the United States). It has succeeded not only in balancing a flexible, absorptive, crowd-pleasing, shared culture with a more private, domestic one but also in taking advantage of that balance to build an increasingly powerful global commercial force. In other words, Japan's growing cultural presence has created a mighty engine of national cool" (2002). In the 1980s, before the bubble economy burst, Japan exerted influence in Western countries and became a model for business and production processes but in recent years Japan has struggled economically. According to the argument presented here, the influence of Japan has now shifted to 'national cool' products streaming from Japanese producers, and as a nation, Japan is able to gain some political and economic power through the dissipation of its popular culture to other nations.

Whether GNC has helped Japan in this aspect is debatable, but in some ways McGray's discussion can be connected to Japan's relationship with other Asian

countries in the marketing of Japanese popular media products. Through mass media such as comics and Japanese pop music, Asian countries have also become introduced to the production of these commodities the Japanese way. Japanese *manga* has changed how comics are packaged, sold, and consumed in areas like Hong Kong and has helped elevate the perceived cultural and social status of comics in that culture as well (Lai and Dixon, 2001). When entering an Asian market, Japanese record companies and talent agencies like Amuse create locally born talent backed up by “Japanese capital, management know-how, and marketing strategies” to help sell records and CD players as well to regional markets, creating consumer desire in multiple directions (Iwabuchi 2002: 102). Japanese idol singers become “providers of dreams” for people in places like Hong Kong where idols and the ‘Japanese dream’ connected to socio-economic development and success go hand in hand (Aoyagi 2005: 253).

Regardless of what kind of commodity Japanese companies promote in Asia, commodities related to production and electronics are considered a symbol of modernity, and Japan perceives itself as bringing to other Asian countries the development involved in becoming a modern capitalist society in the way Japan did in the 1950s and 1960s. Leo Ching writes, “There is a persistent desire not only to Japanize Asia but also to Asianize Japan, a desire both to see Japan as the embodiment of Asia and to construct Asia as a reflection of Japan’s past – in short, to place Asian countries along a spatial continuum, but at the same time to deny them temporal coevalness” (2001: 302). Ching compares the model understood by Japanese companies in Asia to a gaggle of geese flying in a V pattern in which the head of the group, Japan, guides all the other Asian countries to progress.

The influence and flow of Japanese goods and production models into countries like Korea creates conflicts as national governments and citizens try to restrict and control what products are allowed to be imported in an attempt to define a clear cut national identity and create pride for cultural products created from within the country. Korea and Japan have always had tense relations. However, when it came to the adaptation of the “Japanese model” of production in postcolonial Korea using Japanese machinery, equipment, and parts, this held no contradiction but was in fact a “practical motivation for modernization, development, and enhancement of the convenience of life” (Han 2001: 196). The Japan that represents modernity as depicted in its electronic goods like CD players and TV sets is “harmless” but other Japanese cultural products such as popular music and *anime* were considered to be “essentially Japanese” and hence rejected and prohibited by the government until 1999 when bans on popular media such as Japanese music were finally lifted in South Korea (Han 2001: 201). It could be argued that these modern commodities and production processes, though made in Japan or reliant on procedures perfected by industries in Japan, are not considered threatening to the construction of national identity or pride as they are arguably tied to Western systems, technologies, and ideologies that were adapted by the Japanese in the first place and that helped Japan to become one of the leading economic powers in the world today.

Even Japanese popular music, like J-rock, can be understood as an amalgamation of Western influences mostly coming from American and British popular music. Tobin describes Japanese video games and *manga* as constructed of “deodorized tropes” that include “cultureless landscapes, nationalityless characters, and hybrid intertextual references” (2004: 263). In Japan, this is described as *mukokuseki*, as ‘non-Japaneseness,’ when something or something is lacking any kind

of recognizable nationality or when racial or ethnic characteristics and contexts have been erased from the cultural product (Iwabuchi 2004: 58). Scholars like Iwabuchi wonder if Western consumers can learn anything about Japan when aspects of media such as *anime* are lacking nationality even before they entered the process of localization and erasure of any distinct 'cultural odour.' Hence, one wonders how much anyone can learn about Japan from popular culture and how much influence a concept like 'Gross National Cool' really has in terms of power and economic success.

Perspective of J-rock Fans on Japan

J-rock may be influenced by Western music movements, but it is not exactly a completely 'culturally odourless' commodity when it is clear to fans that Japanese musicians are creating and performing this music, usually in Japanese. After having encountered the concept of *mukokuseki* discussed in Iwabuchi's work, I began to wonder whether consumption of Japanese popular culture really affected people's perception of Japanese culture and society, especially when the person interested in these media can be considered to be a fan who is usually more discriminating and knowledgeable about what it is they consume. Fans who do not understand Japanese tend to make broad generalizations and portray the Japanese culture as better than Western culture. Those who understand Japanese and/or have been to Japan have a more complex perception of Japan. Both types of fans have a draw to Japan and Japanese culture that is connected heavily to the concept of an 'imagined' Japan.

Some informants also felt that J-rock was one of the instrumental things, even more than *anime* or *manga*, that lead them to explore further into Japanese culture through learning the language, reading the literature, and other activities from which they learned more about Japanese culture and society. For example, those that translated lyrics into English felt that they were able to grasp on some level the

Japanese thought process and have an appreciation for the poetry of the language. Though some fans new to J-rock feel that they have learned a lot about Japanese culture through music, in reality, J-rock is only representative of a small part of Japan: a subculture dominated by teenage girls. However, fans are introduced to a slice of an underground youth culture that does affect how they perceive Japanese society and construct their identity.

When describing perceptions of Japan, there are differences between fans that have never been to Japan and have no knowledge of the Japanese language and those that have traveled to Japan and/or have some Japanese language skills:

I didn't know they could be that open about the culture. Like, some things are more open than we thought they were because traditional culture seems very well mannered. I don't know how to explain it. They just seem so everyday people, and they're very, very respectful and very low-key. And then you see this and it's like wow. But, it hasn't really changed my idea of the culture at all. I just didn't know they were that open, that their ideas were so creative until now. I didn't know music could take on an aspect that it does have. (Patricia: May 26, 2006)

They have a reputation to be a really closed country. There's restrictions for students and things like that for workers, and everybody's working a lot. But at the same time, when they go out of that they're really extreme, I think. We don't have something like visual (rock) here. And we don't have those totally crazy anime. We don't have that here. But they're more, like, you have to be a certain way; at the same time, they are more crazy, but not in the bad sense. (Claire: June 11, 2006)

Here we see a split between the 'traditional' Japan filled with rules and order and the 'crazy' or 'extreme' Japan which is interpreted as open-minded and creative. Both Claire and Patricia see the conflict between these two extremes. Claire indicates that she understands there is a strong sense of conformity in Japanese society, but at the same time when these social rules are breached, Japanese people will take that freedom to an extreme that a Westerner would usually not approach.

There seems to be a trend with non-Asian fans who have not yet been to Japan to highlight certain aspects of J-rock they believe are deterrents to the spread of J-rock in Western cultures. Most of these concerns also arise when fans have to deal with negative or rude reactions by others who do not understand or accept their interest in J-rock. J-rock, in particular visual rock, contains within it elements that might be considered socially unacceptable or 'weird' by certain groups of people in North America, such as the androgynous appearance of the performers, heavy use of makeup, and the 'dark' imagery associated with music videos or the band members themselves. The fact that the music itself is in another language is a giant hurdle for some people who are not fans. Taking in these negative responses, some fans take a look at those unaccepted aspects that are a part of J-rock and see them as innovative when compared to their own culture, leading them to draw the conclusion that Japanese culture is more open:

I like that they're open, and they do really crazy things. It's a lot more excessive than here, I think. I think they're a lot more sexual than we are. I think it just goes with them being open to new things and a lot more willing to express themselves. (Serena: August 4, 2006)

What this may lead to, however, is the tendency to generalize and place Japan on a pedestal while putting down Western culture:

I think the Japanese culture as a whole is just so much more interesting and diverse than what we got here. There's no real semblance of a real culture and traditions. I'm interested in the different Japanese traditions. You know, why things are significant and things like that. (Here) you either really like something or you don't like it. If you don't like that thing then you can't be a part of it. ... It's a culture vacuum here in North America. We have nothing to call our own. Everything is adopted from somewhere else. To go to another country that has their own sets of values and traditions- what they believe in is just so interesting. Maybe it's because I got no real culture of my own that other people's culture interests me so much more. (Matt: May 27, 2006)

Japan is usually presented to Westerners as a homogeneous society with a national culture that everyone conforms to. This was probably why people like Patricia and Claire were so surprised when they were exposed to Japanese underground culture through their interest in J-rock. As for Matt, seeing Japan presented in this neat package of their national culture makes him question his own heritage. Matt is himself Canadian, but does not see as distinct any values or traditions that are specifically Canadian and believes that he has no 'culture.' Seeing this, he believes that Japanese culture is better than North American or Canadian culture, which stresses conformity. There are others like Matt who feel that they identify more with Japanese culture than the one they were born into:

I find that I associate more with the Japanese culture than anything else. It just seems that I'm more comfortable with the Japanese culture. They have a sense of openness that you come here to North America, and everyone's just so conservative. Nobody has the guts to go out and do something that nobody else has done. Everything is within these guidelines that we have to follow. Everyone has to follow these norms, and I just find Asian cultures are more open because they don't have that barrier like we do here. ... Here, anything that is deemed out of place is deemed queer. Over there it's out of place it's just unique. It's showing their talent, their creativity. (Patricia: May 26, 2006)

For both Matt and Patricia, through the consumption of various entertainments from Japan, their whole lives have become enveloped in cultural products from a foreign country which in turn shape their understanding of their own culture as well. Some fans even went so far as to say that they wished that they were Japanese:

I guess (I) really (dislike) the fact that I'm not a part of it. It kind of makes me feel a little down sometimes, but I wasn't born there. I'm not a Japanese person. I mean, there really isn't anything I don't like about it. I haven't dug too much into it to find something that I don't like, but I am sure there will be a few things I don't like. ... If I can live out there for a little while, maybe be part of their culture. Live as a Japanese citizen- maybe up in the mountains, you know. I think I might enjoy that. (John: August 4, 2006)

What Matt, Patricia, and John all have in common is that they are still new to J-rock (two years or less) or not as involved in the J-rock fandom, identified as *anime* fans, and were without any knowledge of the Japanese language or experience in the country. As John expresses, he wants to be a part of the Japanese culture to experience it but feels left out not only because he is not Japanese but does not understand the language as well. There are a number of *anime* fans who also share a similar sentiment, as they feel disconnected from the culture that produces the things they love that play such an integral role in their lives. Not all J-rock fans share these opinions and perceptions, but it is perhaps true that many fans started out with these viewpoints that later change as part of a growing and learning process.

Most fans that have a good grasp of the Japanese language, and/ or have spent a considerable amount of time in Japan talk about Japanese culture and society differently. Fans that also have been a part of the J-rock fandom for several years have already gotten past the hyper excitement they came into the fandom with, and are not only older but are also more critical as well. These kinds of fans do make comparisons between Japanese and Western culture in which Japanese culture seems better. But there is less glorification of Japanese culture, and they are much more hesitant to make rash conclusions or generalizations.

Those who have traveled to Japan usually undergo some culture shock and come back with a re-evaluated opinion. Evelyn had been studying at a university in Tokyo for a year when I interviewed her back in 2004. Here, she discusses her first experience in Japan as a high school freshman on an exchange programme. What she recounts here is similar to what a lot of *anime* and *manga* fans go through the first time they come to Japan:

The first time I've ever encountered actual Japanese culture - that was the time I had the worst culture shock because I was expecting this

kind of this land of *anime*. Or, you would go and they would all be, like, yeah *anime*, and I would totally be all popular because I'd be, like, I like *anime* and other people would be, like, so do I! And you'd be, like, yay! I don't even know what the hell I was expecting. I was just really stupid. So I went over there, and I was, like, yeah *anime*! I think a lot of American people have this perception of the Japanese as this really quiet and like serious and kind of like sullen race of people or whatever, but the minute you step over here you know that it's completely wrong. And so, I have all those stereotypes of Japanese people, like they're very quiet and they're very hard working, and then I get there, and my host dad had been laid off his job and stuff, and he just kind of sat around the house all day. And I didn't know that Japanese women didn't work, so I was all surprised about that. ... Take every image I had of the Japanese in my mind and turn it around and you've got what they actually are. (Evelyn: January 18, 2004)

There are some Japanese culture enthusiasts who come to Japan with a sense of entitlement because they feel that they have been exposed to some aspect of Japanese culture that is not considered 'traditional,' like having an interest in *anime* as opposed to the tea ceremony just makes them ten times cooler with Japanese people. Evelyn only touches on it lightly here. I have encountered more extreme cases. She was expecting some sort of acceptance based on the fact that she was American but knew a facet of Japanese popular culture. It was a shock, but this assumption was quickly pushed aside as she was exposed to what life was like in Japan. Oftentimes, those who live in Japan for a period of time face not only culture shock, but day to day interactions with the environment and the people lead many to draw clear cut boundaries between who they are and what they identify with:

I'm American, and the American way of looking at things is what I was raised with. Even after being in Japan after two years, it is very clear to me that I am American. Not so much because of the way I look or whatever ancestry I might have, but from having from raised there. If you're raised in America, you're American. (Beth: January 19, 2004)

Beth, who still feels that she has a limited grasp of the Japanese language, talked about how she feels a giant invisible wall between her and others around her because of the language barrier. For Melissa, who had spent a year in Japan as a university

student, her experiences in Japan as a student had strengthened her own identity as an American. She had to deal with Japanese people on a daily basis and through that process, she came to evaluate the points of differences and similarities between her environment and those around her compared to her life in the US. Both Beth and Melissa still enjoy living in Japan despite this, but the reality of living as an immigrant in a foreign country and the boundaries and limited mobility associated with that becomes apparent to anyone after living in a foreign environment eventually culminating in some a love-hate relationship with the culture.

Despite problems that may lead to a feeling of alienation related to living in a foreign country, many people are still drawn to Japan and have a longing for the country even after they had completed a year studying or working there. The J-rock fans I talked to described the yearning to return to Japan drove them to eventually find the means to do so:

I had to (come to Japan). I did. I was getting very, very stagnant in America. I didn't really have anywhere to go there. I mean, I could have gone to school, to college up in San Francisco, but I know that I would just kind would have dried up. I've visited Japan before for the concerts, and I just knew I had to come live here for a while and experience it. And I'm really glad to be here. It was a really good decision, because I feel like I know now what I'm supposed to do next with my life- the next step. It was a draw. It was some invisible little command within my body saying you must go there. (Kendell: January 14, 2004)

After conducting this interview, Kendell remained in Japan to complete a university exchange program at Waseda University before returning to California to complete a BA degree in Japanese and eventually secure the means to return to Japan and work there as an English teacher. Her motivation to complete her degree was tied to a desire to return to Japan and live there. It was because of J-rock that that she made her first journey outside the United States by herself, an experience which eventually played a large role in how she is living her life and setting her future goals.

For other J-rock fans who have had the opportunity to visit the country, but not live there for an extended period of time, their interests prior to coming to Japan allowed them to look at the country and guide their activities so that they experienced Japan differently from the average tourist:

I think it (interest in J-rock) allowed me to get to know much more about the depth of Japanese culture. Like, if I had just been there on a trip, of course I've seen the fashion and the tourist areas. But now by knowing J-rock and all these subcultures, I know what drives people more into these subcultures. It's hard to explain. Someone opens a tourist guide and sees a picture of cosplayers and just think it's weird fashion. But now I see it, and I know what it is. Not (their) motivations, but why they are the way they are- why they act the way they are. (Elaine, 19)

Though so many people told me that they did not learn anything about Japanese culture from listening to J-rock, as Elaine demonstrates, being a J-rock fan means that they had some experience and understanding of certain aspects of Japanese culture that go beyond the cultural stereotypes of Japan as *geisha*, *kimono*, *karate*, technological advances, and Hello Kitty so rampant in Western culture.

Even J-rock fans with little experience of the language or the actual country have a perception of Japan beyond that of 'traditional' aspects because of their interest in Japanese popular culture. No matter what perspective a fan may have of Japan, be it idealistic or bitter, it is one that is constructed and imagined. At the end of the day, nothing can beat real life experience when it comes to trying to understand another culture. However, for the J-rock fans who are never really able to learn about the "true" Japan through consumption of Japanese popular culture, J-rock has in some way normalized Japanese culture, made it feel less foreign, and in fact has broken down boundaries for some people. They are less intimidated by language and geographical differences and more open to consuming commodities from other cultures. Though the imagined Japan may only represent a small portion of Japanese

culture and society as a whole, it still has real impact on those who construct it in the first place.

Creating an Identity for Themselves

Whether a fan's understanding of Japanese culture is affected in any way by J-rock or not, J-rock does make an impact on fans individually. Surrounding themselves with popular media from Japan, fans undoubtedly identify with and create a kind of bond with these materials, and this has consequences for how they define themselves. For many fans, J-rock has changed their life by giving them confidence to try new things and a goal in life. By following the career of their favourite Japanese bands, fans turn their attention to the happenings occurring in a locality different from their own, placing an importance on Japan and planting a desire to someday travel or live there.

So many of the J-rock fans I encountered are affected by their interest and dream of a career that would take them into the music industry or to Japan. Many expressed an interest in careers related to photography, illustration, fashion and costume design, music production, and video editing. Others dream of starting their own band, working as a fan in the music industry to help promote J-rock artists in North America or finding a job in Japan as an English teacher. A lot of these dream jobs are connected in one way or another to the arts and humanities, and the desire to someday work in these related areas came about from participating in various fan activities connected to J-rock. Fan activities in J-rock fandom and an interest in J-rock can potentially translate into a desire to nurture 'official' cultural and social capital in an attempt to gain access to careers related to the music industry as a

producer or promoter, or other industries, which are related to the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

In addition to this, J-rock has helped many to define their identity and come to terms with who they are. I think that there are some J-rock fans who feel that they are “different” or “weird” compared to those around them. Unable to find a subculture in Western society that they feel they can belong to, many turn to J-rock. In a way, many J-rock fans are rebelling against the form of rebellion espoused by North American youth, who may connect with other musical movements such as punk, rock, emo, goth, etc. as a form of ‘rebellion.’ Despite the fact that J-rock draws on influences from many Western musical genres, J-rock fans see themselves as separate and distinct from these subcultures. Even so, identifying with J-rock is also about finding something that “fits.” Some fans, who had rejected existing youth subcultures found through J-rock a category with which to identify themselves:

It's just made me think about what's acceptable. Up until now I was afraid, was this acceptable? ... And then I'm watching them going, you know what? I don't think it matters. ... It kind of makes you realize that things about yourself that you looked down upon really aren't that bad at all. ... If you wear anything different, like, oh, god you're a goth or you're an emo or you're this or you're that. And I didn't want to fit in with any of those cultures. And then I came across the J-rock and the popular culture, and they wore anything they wanted to. It could be sparkly. It could be black. It would be white. It could be the full colours of the rainbow. And I realized that my love for doing crazy things and my unwillingness to follow the crowd was a good thing. And so I learned my uniqueness was a good thing from watching these guys because my love for colour was kind of one of those things that normally is not a good thing. ... It kind of made me look a little better upon myself. (Patricia: May 26, 2006)

It is not only the J-rock bands and the music they produce that is important for fans but also the social networks that arise from their participation in the J-rock community online. By interacting with others who share their same interest, fans feel

less alone and also build confidence when it comes to interaction with others both online and off:

I guess it completely changed it (my life). I talk a lot more with people. Before I was a lot more shy, and now it's totally different. When I'm in a convention, I'm really not shy. I can talk to anyone, anybody. Before I wasn't like this. I was more shy, and people were laughing at me a lot because I was hiding. But now it's more like I'll answer to them, and I would laugh at them. So it gave me more determination and (made me) less shy. (Claire: June 11, 2006)

When Claire was a child, her classmates constantly ridiculed her because she just seemed to be "different" from everyone else, and she was subject to some bullying. But as she grew older, through her interests, she was able to create a support network of 'real life' and online friends interested in *anime* and Japanese music. This has given Claire the confidence to speak her mind and not be affected by what others might say about Japanese popular culture playing such a large role in her life. Like Claire, Marie has found a place of belonging by being involved in J-rock and the related fan culture:

I don't feel as much as an outcast. I feel like I'm a part of something, and it's not just something small that goes on in my own head. It's huge worldwide! It makes me feel I'm a part. ... (It's) something to call our own. I mean, of course, millions of other people love J-rock and claim it. But, again with that community thing. You're a part of it, so it's yours. It's something you can say that you have, and it can't be taken away from you. Sure, they can take away your music, your pictures, your whatever- but you still experience. You still have all of that at your fingertips. You know, you've listened to it, you've enjoyed it, and you can tell other people about it. (Marie: August 4, 2006)

So much of the importance of J-rock in people's lives is defined by whom they interact with as well as the music. It is largely through the Internet that those like Marie who feel that they are 'outcasts' in their own society are able to connect with others just like them and find a sense of belonging missing in their physical environment. The interactions with others in the fandom and the experience of J-

rock music itself have all become internalized and transformed into something that can never be taken away from her. J-rock fans are an example of how it is possible to create meaningful relationships and imagined communal bonds with others based on interests and hobbies over the Internet. Perhaps J-rock fans are unable to understand the 'true' Japan from their consumption of Japanese music, but their interest in Japanese popular culture media does have a positive impact on their lives.

When I asked her whether she saw a difference between J-rock fan culture and a J-rock community, Leslie responded by saying:

When you say (J-rock) culture to me, my mind immediately jumps to people that have been following J-rock for a long time and has a decent knowledge of J-rock. ... Like a smaller group that's not more dedicated, but have been there longer, and J-rock has been fused with their life for a longer period of time. ... (Culture is) a way of life. ... Because you carry your culture with you everywhere, so it's your life and how you've lived for the majority of your life. It's also what affects your decisions and your views toward certain situations. (August 31, 2006)

Not everyone who listens to J-rock will take it past a 'mindless' consumption of music to make it become an important part of their life or integrating in the way they act or perceive the world. However, for some like Leslie, including those who have been to Japan or are living there, being a J-rock fan is not even about liking the music because it is Japanese, though perhaps it did have something to do with how they came across J-rock in the first place. But in some cases, their lives have become so heavily intertwined with supporting J-rock bands, musicians, and being a part of that fan culture that it becomes an inseparable part of their life. Those like Melissa, Beth, Elaine, and many others have made the supporting and promoting of these bands a major part of their lives and have formed meaningful social connections with both Japanese and non-Japanese people through an interest in J-rock.

There are always going to be casual consumers of J-rock for whom the music

has no more meaning than being another kind of entertainment to consume until the next thing rolls along. However, J-rock fans are the people who remain an example of those whose hopes, desires, dreams, and life have been shaped by this music from another country. These things are being framed through a perception of Japan that only represents a portion of Japanese culture and society. Yet, it is quite different from the typical Western perception of Japan that is centred on its traditional aspects. These youth, through their consumption of Japanese media, regard Japan in the same manner as some Asian countries do. Especially for fans who have little knowledge of the language or little real life experience in Japan, Japan is a symbol of social progress and creativity. Though there are people who say that exposure to Japanese popular culture has opened their eyes to different cultures, in reality, as they construct their lives primarily around Japanese music, Japan remains the primary draw. For some J-rock fans, they believe that it is the place where they can be accepted for who they are, and Japan becomes an utopia in the same way the United States is for people in some non-Western countries.

Conclusion

Cross cultural exchange and reinterpretation is nothing new, but the Internet and globalization have made it more accessible to a wider number of people who previously might not have had the social status or capital to take part in these exchanges, and makes it easier for those who share alternative hobbies to organize and band together. The J-rock fan community is one that developed out of an interest in a musical genre from another country that gained popularity partly through J-rock related media available through the Internet. Fans promoted J-rock through fan sites and uploaded and shared media files with others. Outside a few concert events and *anime* conventions, interaction with other J-rock fans is primarily conducted over the Internet.

Around the mid-1990s, there was the sense that there was one large community that all J-rock fans belonged to on the Internet; there were a few other online communities to follow later but for the most part, most fans participated in all of these communities. Most English-speaking fans frequented the same mailing lists and chat rooms, and the group was small enough that everyone knew each other. These early fans shared a close bond with each other and were described as 'a close-knit group.' The small number of J-rock fans naturally banded together regardless of whether they were all interested in the same bands or not.

J-rock became more popular over time, and more people started to join these virtual communities. Starting from 1999, as more information and media became available, many smaller online communities emerged. This shift resulted in part because long time fans 'grew' up, and many left the J-rock fandom or moved on to other genres of music, and the wide availability of information and media on the Internet meant that there were more new fans and casual fans. There were conflicts

between newer fans and older fans that led to the creation of new online communities.

Fan activities such as cosplay, or dressing in the costume of one's favourite musician, and fan fiction are important ways in which fans, many of them female, can externalize and share their interest with others. They may gain cultural and social capital, such as recognition and praise from others. Fans also place importance on values such as supporting the bands by purchasing official merchandise and learning about and respecting the band members. People are labelled in the fandom as either 'fangirls' or 'elitists' if they do not seem to concede to these values, suggesting a group identity in which there is a distinction between who belongs or does not belong. This competition reinforces a feeling of a group identity and sense of belonging to a larger J-rock fan community as well as undermines it. Some fans dislike the competition, but through these competitions fans are building social and cultural capital within the community. This is important in creating ties to the fan culture, a sense of belonging, and a perception that involvement in the fandom is important.

As J-rock becomes more well known, it also becomes less exotic and J-rock related online communities are less likely to be involved in discussing the structure and influences of Japanese rock music in attempt to define the genre. Instead, these communities primarily provide a place for light discussion and to share J-rock media, from mp3 files to magazine scans. Online communities still provide a place for social interaction with other fans, and many people continue to make new friends and expand their social networks using this method. But, as some people are afraid of being ridiculed, they choose to 'lurk,' or view activities from the sidelines, instead of participating. J-rock online communities allow fans to connect with other like-minded people, but more often than not, they choose to interact more with their friends in private conversations away from public discussions on the virtual

communities. Despite the fact that there are now hundreds of J-rock related virtual communities and that many fans choose to 'lurk,' fans feel a sense of belonging with other J-rock fans that they have never met or communicated with. The large community that really did exist in the early days has been replaced with an 'imaginary community' which bonds all J-rock fans as part of one group no matter what band or sub-genre they are interested in. This bond is based on hobbies and interests, not connections to localities, nationalities or ethnicities.

J-rock fans are connected not only by their interest in J-rock but by their interest in other aspects of Japanese culture as well. Most J-rock fans were already interested in or knew about Japanese popular culture, including *anime*, prior to listening to J-rock. Though they identify primarily with J-rock, for many, listening to Japanese music was another way they incorporated more of Japanese culture into their lives after becoming interested in *anime* and *manga*. J-rock fans surround themselves with products from Japan including books, music, and other media and integrate it into their lives. Fans feel distinct from others because they know about underground Japanese bands that are mostly unknown in North America. For both male and female J-rock fans, interest in visual rock is usually paired with a liberal stance towards issues concerning gender and sexuality, and some see this as something that differentiates them their peers. Fans are attracted to the image of J-rock musicians that stresses cross-dressing or androgyny, and they try to incorporate this style into their daily clothing by making their own clothes or buying Japanese clothing brands.

For many fans who found J-rock when they were in their teens, the music becomes a way to deal with the difficulties associated with adolescence. Those who feel that they are different from their peers use J-rock to create a distinct identity. Though they may be different, by being involved with the J-rock online community,

some fans have found a place to belong, a place where they feel they can be understood. Some may grow up and leave J-rock behind, but there are many fans for whom a love of J-rock has become so integrated in their life that J-rock continues to play a large role in their life even when they are no longer in their teens. It is arguable that social interaction with other fans through the Internet, conventions, and concerts strengthens the influence of J-rock in their lives. Being part of the J-rock fan culture provides fans with emotional support when those around them do not understand their interest in Japanese culture.

The combination of experiencing J-rock, participation or even observation of J-rock communities on the Internet, and an interest in Japan and Japanese culture are all key factors in influencing the dreams and desires of many fans. Japan is conceived as a source of creativity. Some people who have never been to Japan also perceive it as a place where people are more “open” and accepting of differences. There are people who claim they are more at home with Japanese culture than American or Canadian culture precisely because their life revolves around the consumption and discussion of Japanese media. This motivates some fans to achieve the goal of going to Japan to live, work, or study there. In some ways, J-rock fans look towards Japan with the same desire as youth in other countries who turn to America. For some fans, the nurturing of cultural and social capital useful within the J-rock fan culture can be adapted to official capital, such as getting an education, in order to fulfill their goals. Many fans who are involved in fan activities, including those such as maintaining fan websites or playing in a copy band, discover new talents and interests to further enrich their life.

From this study of J-rock fan culture on the Internet, I have explored several issues that go beyond the topic of Japanese music fans. People do not need to

understand a foreign language in order to appreciate music from that country. Instead, through a process of recontextualization and reinterpretation, listeners relate to foreign music and other media through perception of images and cultural symbols and the experience of certain emotions that create personal connections to the particular media.

The dissipation of computer media files and information through the Internet has allowed cross-cultural exchange of popular media to reach a larger number of people, especially those that otherwise might not have had the capital or opportunity to be introduced to or access these media before. The Internet aids in the growth of a subculture by giving fans, who tend to be spread out in different geographical locations, a way to keep in touch with others who share their interests. For those interested in popular media from another culture, through the Internet, they are able to cross national boundaries, allowing them to access information and merchandise and contact people from the country that the media had originated from.

Online fan communities play a large role in spreading information and media to potential fans and give existing fans a place to bond with others and feel a sense of belonging. As a movement gains popularity and the population of the small, close-knit virtual community that existed at the beginning of the movement expands, a larger number of virtual communities that focus on specific aspects of the subculture replace the older communities that defined the movement in broader terms. As demonstrated by the growth of J-rock fan culture in North America, this expansion takes place in a very short period of time and is directly related to development in computer hardware, software, and Internet technologies. Even subcultures that are mostly experienced through the Internet can foster a feeling of belonging and community even if people are unable to see the faces of those they interact with.

Even those who do not actively contribute to a virtual community can feel that they are a part of a larger group. An imagined community arises which connects people who share hobbies and interests, not ethnic or nationalistic ties. The characteristic of the Internet allows people to move in and out between different communities with ease. They are able to participate in multiple online communities and build social networks on the Internet that are an addition to the social connections they have built in the physical world. And as demonstrated by J-rock fans, though people may be able to disengage with virtual communities by turning off their computer, interactions on the Internet have a real effect on their lives.

Clearly, J-rock fan culture is an example of how, through processes of globalization, non-Western media is influencing those in Western nations in ways that are similar to Western popular culture in non-Western countries. In addition to creating new business opportunities for commerce, interaction with popular media produced in another cultural context broadens the consumer's imagination and affects the perception and understanding of the culture and society from which the media originated. Though this constructed image may be far from presenting a complete picture of the culture in question, it has great influence for some people in shaping their self-identity and driving their ambitions and desires so that it may lead them to dream of or migrate across national boundaries. The Internet communities and processes of cultural globalization that result in cross-cultural exchange of popular culture and mass media allow people to construct multiple and fluid identities. In this globalizing world, it is possible to not only be connected through nationalistic or ethnic ties, but people may draw connections with others based on hobbies and other categories that tie them to people and movements across the globe.

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Angura-kei – Literally “underground style.” This music genre has some connections to the underground visual rock scene, but as a musical genre is separate from visual rock. It is more connected to a wider counterculture, avant-garde movement as defined by those like dramatist Teruyama Shuuji in the 1960s and 1970s who drew on Japanese traditionalism and occultism as inspiration for their works. Some bands cover their faces with white makeup to create a unique appearance that typically harkens towards a traditional Japanese aesthetic. Stage costumes may range from Shōwa-era schoolboy outfits and kimonos with elements such as sakura blossoms and Japanese paper screens. Borrowing from the Shōwa-era avant garde movement, typical themes may include nationalistic themes and a reinterpretation and nostalgia for ‘traditional’ Japanese culture. Bands of note associated with this genre include: Cali=Gari; Guruguru Eigakan (Revolving Movie Theatre); Inugami Circus Dan (Dog Circus Group); Kinniku Shōjo-tai (Muscle Maiden Sash); Mucc.

Anime – Japanese for animation. Used outside of Japan to strictly refer to Japanese animation.

Bandgirl (Bangya) – Female fans of visual rock bands. It can be an unflattering term when it takes to mean that the fan is only interested in the band because of the cute guys, though bandgirls do use it to refer to themselves. It seems to have some parallels with ‘fangirl,’ often used within the English-speaking J-rock fanbase. This term originates from Japan, and North American fans that have had some experience with concerts in Japan or are familiar with the Japanese language will often use this word.

Bandman (Bandoman) – Male musicians in a visual rock band. This term originates from Japan, and North American fans that have had some experience with concerts in Japan or are familiar with the Japanese language will often use this word.

Cons – Shorthand for convention. Though there is one J-rock convention in California now in its second year, cons typically refer to *anime* conventions organized either by industry or by fans.

Cosplay – Shorthand for ‘costume play,’ which can be done as a tribute to one’s favorite character. Someone who participates in cosplay is known as a ‘cosplayer.’ Cosplay is typically connected to *anime* and *manga* fandoms both in Japan and elsewhere, though for J-rock, in particular Visual-kei, it is an important aspect of the fan culture. J-rock fans dress up in the stage costumes of their favourite musicians. These costumes are typically handmade, and serious cosplayers try to duplicate the minute details of the original costume from using the same fabric or embellishments.

Dōjinshi – Self-published fan publications found within Japanese fan culture. Though *dōjinshi* tends to be associated with the *anime* and *manga* fandom in North America, in Japan *dōjinshi* can cover a wider number of topics. They typically feature amateur comics or fan fiction.

Fangirl / Fanboy – Can have various meanings, but is typically used to describe fans who put more emphasis on the image and look of the band over the actual music. It can be used as a derogatory word to implicate that someone is not a ‘serious fan.’

‘Indies’ – Bands who are not signed on to a major record label and are playing on the indie circuit sometimes even self-producing their musical releases on self-created labels. There is a strong indie visual rock scene in Japan centred mainly in the metropolitan areas. However, there is a distinction made between J-indies and Visual indie in which J-indies, or Japanese indie, having many musical similarities with Western indie music.

Instore Event (Instore) – Promotional events held at music stores typically catering to Visual rock fans like Brand X or Club Indies in Tokyo. These events normally coincide with new releases. Those who purchase the new item will be given a numbered ticket to the event which usually consist of the band members answering questions from the audience and a handshake session afterwards which fans typically bring letters or gifts. Some fans buy the same release several times from different stores in order to attend all the events held by the band.

J-pop – Short for Japanese popular music. Used often in North America to refer to mainstream popular music. The category is sometimes also inclusive of pop rock bands.

J-rock – Short for Japanese rock music. Though it often is used to refer to a wide variety of musical styles related to rock, J-rock is heavily connected with Visual Rock and independent label bands in North America and Europe.

Live – A live concert. Originates from the Japanese *raibu*.

Livehouse – A concert venue, typically describing smaller concert venues as opposed to larger venue like Budokan.

Livejournal – A social networking site that lets users keep an online journal and participate in topical communities.

Manga – Japanese for comics. Used outside of Japan to strictly refer to Japanese comics.

Oshare-kei – A genre of visual rock originating with the band Baroque starting in 2001. *Oshare* is a widely used word that means trendy. Japanese fans use the term *osare-kei* in order to differentiate from *oshare-kei*, which is often applied to things that are trendy from neighborhoods to fashion. North American J-rock fans typically use *oshare-kei*. Some parallels can be drawn between North American pop punk and *oshare* bands. The lyrics are typically non-politically and socially charged in nature and cover light topics concerning love, sadness, and happiness. The meaning of *oshare* is reflected in the band’s visual appearance that draws from youth and street fashion. Compared to earlier visual bands, *oshare* bands have colourful outfits that are closer to regular, day-to-day fashion compared to theatrical bands such as Malice Mizer. Recently there have been more and more visual bands that follow the *oshare*

trend. Bands of note associated with this genre include: Antic Café; Alice Nine; Baroque; Charlotte; Panic Channel.

Visual rock – Also referred to as Visual-*kei*, VK, or Visual. A musical sub-genre originating from Japan in the late 1980s that places emphasis the aesthetic image of the musicians from elaborate costumes to stage performances to varying degrees. Visual rock bands are not typically united under one ‘image’ or one ‘sound.’ Bands draw from a variety of musical influences from goth, punk, rock, metal, pop, electronica, etc. Bands of note associated with this genre include: Buck-Tick; Dir en grey; Kuroyume; L’arc~en~Ciel; Lareine; Malice Mizer; Pierrot; Psycho le Cému; Shazna; X, or X Japan.

Yaoi – Stories depicting male-male relationships usually of an explicit nature. This is a genre that is primarily produced by women for a female audience. In Japanese fan cultures, *yaoi* may appear in amateur comics or fan fiction. In North American J-rock fan culture, *yaoi*-type stories are typically presented in fan fiction.

Appendix B: Japanese Musicians and Bands in North America

This is a list of Japanese music artists that have performed at North American *anime* conventions since 2002 with some selected dates from actual tours held by J-rock bands. *Duel Jewel* was the first visual rock band to perform at a US convention. Though this list tries to be as complete as possible, there may be some missing data. Information was compiled from Anime-cons.com and additional Internet research. Europe has had an even wider number of J-rock bands that have held repeated tours in countries such as Germany, France, Finland, and others.

Names that have been italicized can be considered to be visual rock bands or bands that were once connected to the visual rock scene. The list has been organized by year of performance with artists listed in alphabetical order with the appearances they made that year.

2002

B'z

A limited tour with two dates in California.

Duel Jewel

A-kon: Grapevine, TX

Puffy AmiYumi

Anime Expo: Long Beach, CA

2003

B'z

A tour with seven dates in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver.

Camino

A-kon: Grapevine, TX

Duel Jewel

Katsucon: Arlington, VA

Anime Central: Rosemont, IL

Anime Expo: Anaheim, CA

move

AnimeFest: Dallas, TX

Peelander-Z

AnimeNEXT: Rye Brook, NY

T.M. Revolution

Otakon: Baltimore, MD

2004

BLOOD

Ohayocon: Columbus, OH

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

Connichi: Kassel, Germany

Camino

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

A-kon: Dallas, TX

Oni-Con: Houston, TX

Anime USA: Vienna, VA

Duel Jewel

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

Oni-Con: Houston, TX

hiro

Sakuracon: Seattle, WA

Kato, Kumiko

AnimeFest: Dallas, TX

Nan Desu Kan: Aurora, CO

L'arc~en~Ciel

Otakon: Baltimore, MD

Mana (Moi dix mois)

Japan Expo: Paris, France

MAX

AnimeFest: Dallas, TX

Peelander-Z

Otaku Unite Premiere: Philadelphia, PA

AnimeNEXT: Secaucus, NJ

Psycho Le Cému

Pacific Media Expo: Anaheim, CA

A-Kon: Dallas, TX

Tamaki, Nami

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

Pacific Media Expo: Anaheim, CA

A-Kon: Dallas, TX

T.M. Revolution

Pacific Media Expo: Anaheim, CA

2005

BLOOD

TNT: Mexico City, Mexico

TNT: Mexico City, DF, Mexico

Camino

Numa Rei-No Con: Westwego, LA

Chaos+System

Jrock Connection: Santa Clara, CA

D'espairsRay

November tour with two concerts in Maryland and Virginia.

Kato, Kumiko

KamiKazeCon: Houston, TX

Sakura-Con: Seattle, WA

JACON: Orlando, FL

Anime Central: Rosemont, IL

Sogen Con: Marshall, MN

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

A-Kon: Dallas, TX

Otakon: Baltimore, MD

Karma Shejing

Jrock Connection: Santa Clara, CA

the Indigo

Otakon: Baltimore, MD

move

Anime USA: Vienna, VA

Peelander-Z

Cleveland Colossal Convention:

Independence, OH

AnimeNEXT: Secaucus, NJ

Anime Weekend Atlanta: Atlanta, GA

Phantasmagoria

Oni-Con: Houston, TX

Pillows, The

Anime Central: Rosemont, IL

Psycho le Cému

Katsucon: Arlington, VA

MegaCon: Orlando, FL

Anime Overdose: San Francisco, CA

Sakamoto, Maya

Anime Expo: Anaheim, CA

AnimeFest: Dallas, TX

ZZ

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

2006

12012

Oni-Con: Houston, TX

BLOOD

August tour with two dates in Los Angeles and New York City.

Camino

Sakura-Con: Seattle, WA

JRock Connection: Santa Clara, CA

Dacco

Metrocon: Tampa, FL

Comic Con: San Diego, CA

D'espairs Ray

MegaCon: Orlando, F
 AnimeNEXT: Secaucus, NJ
 June 17 CBGB: New York City, NY

Dir en grey

Three City Tour – Concerts held in Los Angeles and New York City with a performance as part of the South by Southwest (SXSW) musical festival in Dallas.

Family Values Tour – A US tour event organized by Korn with one stop in Canada.

High and Mighty Color

Shiokazecon: Houston, TX

HYDE

July tour with three dates across California in Los Angeles, Hollywood, and San Francisco.

Kamijo (LAREINE)

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

Karma Shejing

Jrock Connection: Santa Clara, CA

Kato, Kumiko

Shiokazecon: Houston, TX

Kitade, Nana

Otakon: Baltimore, MD

Kotoko

Anime North: Toronto, ON

A-Kon: Dallas, TX

Mana (Moi dix mois)

Anime Expo: Anaheim, CA

MAX

Anime USA: Vienna, VA

MECHANICAL PANDA

Pacific Media Expo: Los Angeles, CA

Miami

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

Anime Vegas: Las Vegas, NV

Miyawaki & Sakai (12012)

AnimeEXPO: Anaheim, CA

Mothercoat

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

MUCC

Otakon: Baltimore, MD

Olivia

Pacific Media Expo: Los Angeles, CA

Peelander-Z

Ohayocon: Columbus, OH

PENICILLIN nano

A-kon: Dallas, TX

Poplar

FanimeCon: San Jose, CA

yozuka*

Anime Expo: Anaheim, CA

ZZ

A-Kon: Dallas, TX

Anime Evolution: Burnaby, BC

2007

BLOOD

Tour with two dates in New York City and Boston.

Dir en grey

US wide February tour with one stop in Toronto consisting of 13 dates.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

I, _____, have been asked by An Nguyen, a Masters student at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada to participate in her M.A. thesis research project, *Cybercultures From the East: Japanese Rock Music Fans in North America and on the Internet*.

I understand that the purpose of this research is to examine the influence of Japanese popular culture on youth culture. Specifically, this research aims to understand the effects of participation in Japanese rock music fan communities and its consequences for the understanding and consumption of Japanese culture outside of Japan.

I understand that I must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research project.

I understand that there is no direct economic benefit to me for participating in this project. I understand that my participation in this project may help people to better understand the fan culture of those interested in Japanese popular culture. I also understand that this project may or may not have an influence on how companies market Japanese music outside of Japan.

I understand that my participation in this interview is completely voluntary. I further understand that I do not have to answer any questions that I am not comfortable with and that I may withdraw from the interview at any time. Should I choose to withdraw, I will inform the researcher if she may keep the information that I have provided up to that point.

I understand that the interview will be approximately one hour to one hour and a half in length and will be conducted at a time and place of my choosing. I also understand that I may be contacted for follow-up interview at a later date. I may agree to or decline this request.

I understand that there is a possible risk to myself for participating in this research project particularly if my opinion differs from others. To counter any potential risks I am being offered anonymity and confidentiality. I will not be named or identified by any distinctive features, and I will be identified either as "a man" or "a woman." In addition, my given name and Internet name along with community and place names, etc. will be entirely changed.

I understand that the research notes, tapes, and electronic notes will be stored securely away from the research site in a locked cabinet and later in a locked filing cabinet in the residence of the researcher in Ottawa. She will be the only person with access to this information. This information will be stored indefinitely in this cabinet for the purposes of further research, personal study, and as a source of information for any future conference presentations, workshops, or publications.

Upon my request, I will be given a copy of the findings of her research in the form of a Master's thesis upon its completion in April 2007.

If I have any further questions regarding this research, I may address them to An Nguyen or either of her thesis supervisors, Dr. Brian Given and Dr. John Shepherd at the following addresses:

An Nguyen
 Department of Sociology and Anthropology
 Carleton University
 1125 Colonel By Drive
 Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6
 Canada
 Email: anguyen4@connect.carleton.ca

Thesis supervisors:

Dr. Brian Given
 Department of Sociology and
 Anthropology
 Carleton University
 1125 Colonel By Drive
 Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6
 Canada
 Tel: (613) 520-2600
 Email: brian_given@carleton.ca

Dr. John Shepherd
 Department of Sociology and
 Anthropology
 Carleton University
 1125 Colonel By Drive
 Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6
 Canada
 Tel: (613) 520-2600
 Email: john_shepherd@carleton.ca

The Research Ethics Committee at Carleton University has approved this research project. If I have any concerns about my rights or treatment as a research participant, I may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the following address:

Prof. Antonio Gualtieri, Chair
 Carleton University Research Ethics Committee
 Office of Research Services
 511A Tory Building
 1125 Colonel By Drive
 Ottawa, ON K1S 5B1
 Tel: (613) 520-2517
 Email: ethics@carleton.ca

 Participant's Name

 Date

 Researcher's Name

 Date

Appendix D: Questionnaire Questions

About you

1. What is your sex?
2. How old are you?
3. Of what country do you have citizenship in?
4. What country do you currently live in?
5. If you are residing in the United States or Canada, which state or province are you residing in?
6. Would you identify yourself with an ethnicity or culture?
7. What is your primary language?
8. Tell me about your education.
9. What is your occupation?
10. How did you find out about this questionnaire?

Japanese music and popular culture

11. How long have you been interested in J-rock?
12. How did you find out about J-rock?
13. Before you became interested in J-rock were you interested in any other aspects of Japanese culture?
- 13a. If yes, what were you interested in and since when?
14. What was the first J-rock band/artist you were introduced to, and what were some of your first impressions?
15. What J-rock bands/artists do you like now?
16. What kinds of Japanese music do you enjoy? (Check all that apply)
17. What other kinds of music do you enjoy?
18. Are you interested in any other aspects of Japanese culture?

Consumption of Music

19. Where do you usually buy Japanese music related merchandise such as CDs, DVDs, tour goods, books, etc.? This includes imported, domestic releases and/or bootlegs.
20. Aside from buying CDs or DVDs, how do you usually get access to music and video relating to Japanese popular music, including J-rock?
21. Do you own any non-bootleg Japanese music related merchandise? About how many do you own?
22. Besides CDs, DVDs and VHS what other kinds of merchandise do you own?
23. What about unofficial merchandise, bootlegs or traded items related to Japanese music?

On-line and Off-line Activities

24. How often do you use the Internet?
- 24a. If you use the Internet every day, how many hours are you typically online everyday?
25. What do you use the Internet for?
26. Are you involved in any of these fan activities related to J-rock?
27. What kinds of on-line activities concerning Japanese music/J-rock are you involved in, either as an active participant or as a 'lurker' who observes the action?

- 27a. If you are involved in activities like forums, mailing lists, chatrooms, Livejournal, etc., please give the names of the ones you are involved with either as an active participant or a lurker.
28. In your opinion, is there only one large J-rock fan community that all J-rock fans are a part of or are there a number of small J-rock fan communities? Please explain.
29. What do you think makes an 'online community' a community?
30. Do you feel that you are a part of an online J-rock fan community right now?
31. How many communities do you feel you are/were a part of?
32. What do you usually do in an online community about Japanese music?
33. How are you involved with the J-rock fan culture?
34. Have you ever been to Japan?
- 34a. If yes, how many times have you been to Japan?
- 34b. What was the major reason you went to Japan?
- 34c. How long were you there?
35. Have you ever seen a J-rock band in concert or at some other kind of event?
- 35a. If you answered yes, which Japanese bands or musicians did you see?
36. What do you think about Japanese bands playing outside of Japan in places like North America or Europe?
37. Do you go to anime conventions/cons?
38. How do you feel about Japanese bands or musicians playing at anime conventions?

Being a J-rock Fan

39. What do you think you might have in common with other J-rock fans?
40. What kinds of themes or messages embodied in J-rock do you think are important to fans?
41. Has becoming a fan of J-rock affected your understanding of Japanese culture and society?

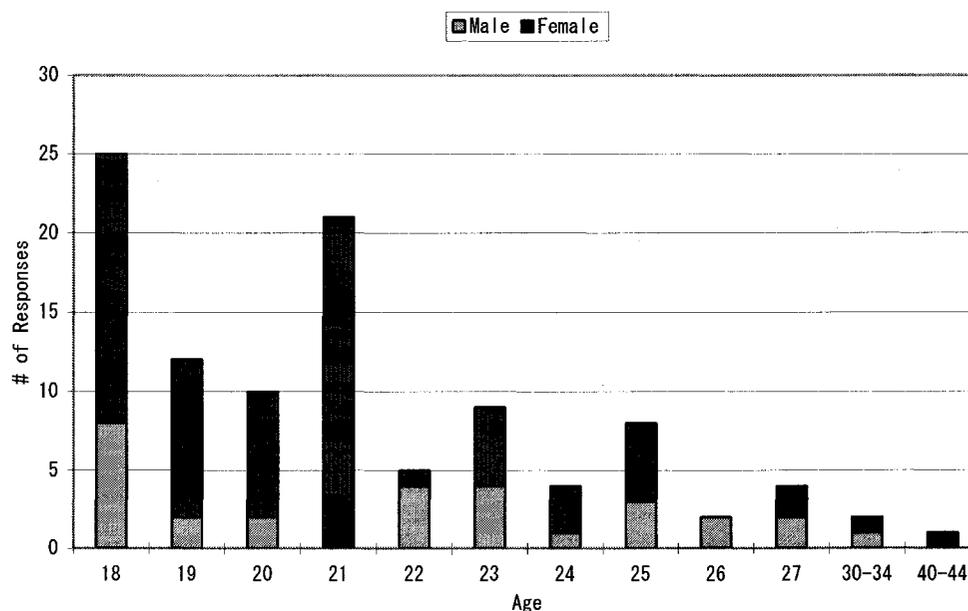
Final Comments

42. What do you like most about Japanese rock music?
43. What don't you like about Japanese rock music?
44. What does J-rock mean to you?
45. How has J-rock changed your life?
46. And finally, I am interested to hear any other views or comments that you may have. Are there any other questions that you think I should ask people or explore further?

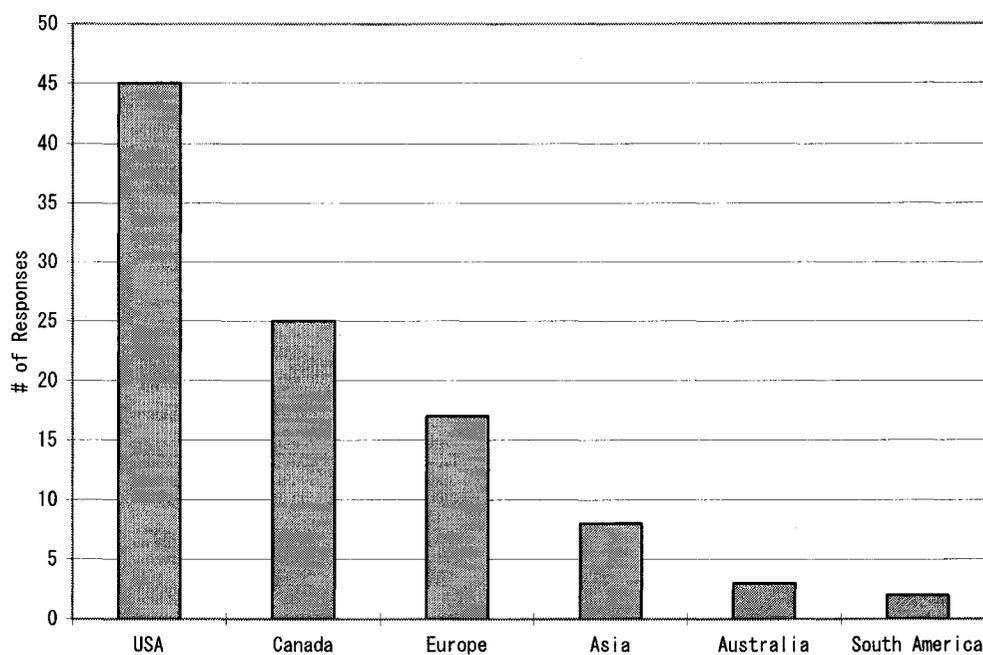
Appendix E: Selected Questionnaire Responses

I conducted an online J-rock questionnaire from June 28, 2006 to September 28, 2006. The link to the questionnaire was posted on various Internet fan communities devoted to J-rock, and a total of 100 responses were collected. The majority of J-rock fans are females, and this is reflected in 31 males and 69 females that participated in this questionnaire. This appendix section presents charts and commentary on selected quantitative data collected through this questionnaire.

Graph 1: Age of Questionnaire Participants

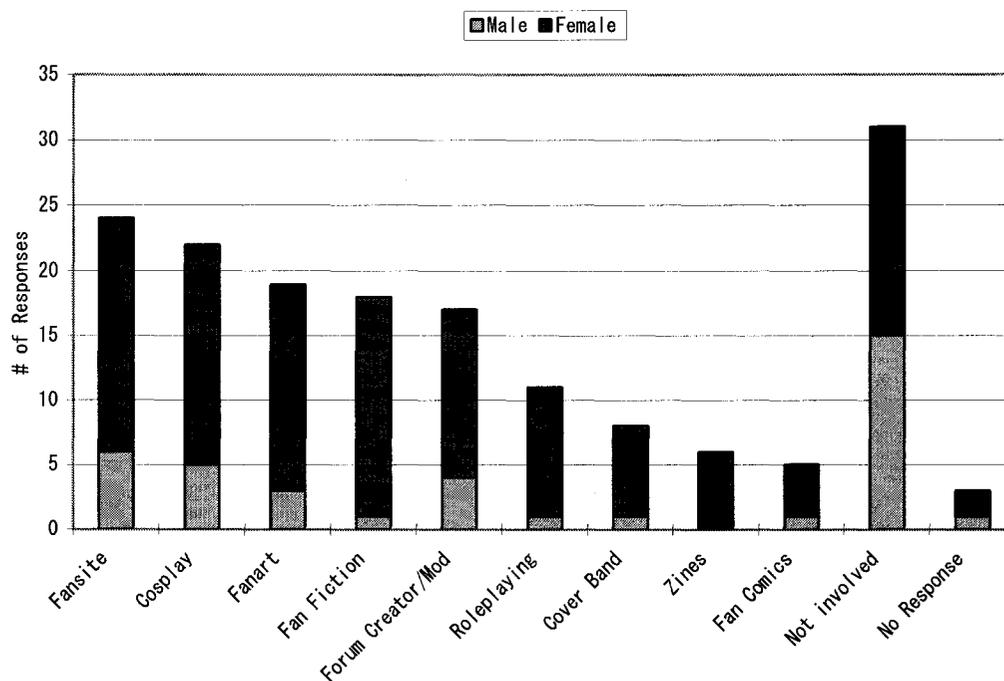


One-fourth of the questionnaire participants are 18 years old. The majority of participants fall within the age range of 18 years to 27 years with female participants outnumbering male participants, indicating that J-rock fan culture is also a youth subculture in North America.

Graph 2: Location of Participants

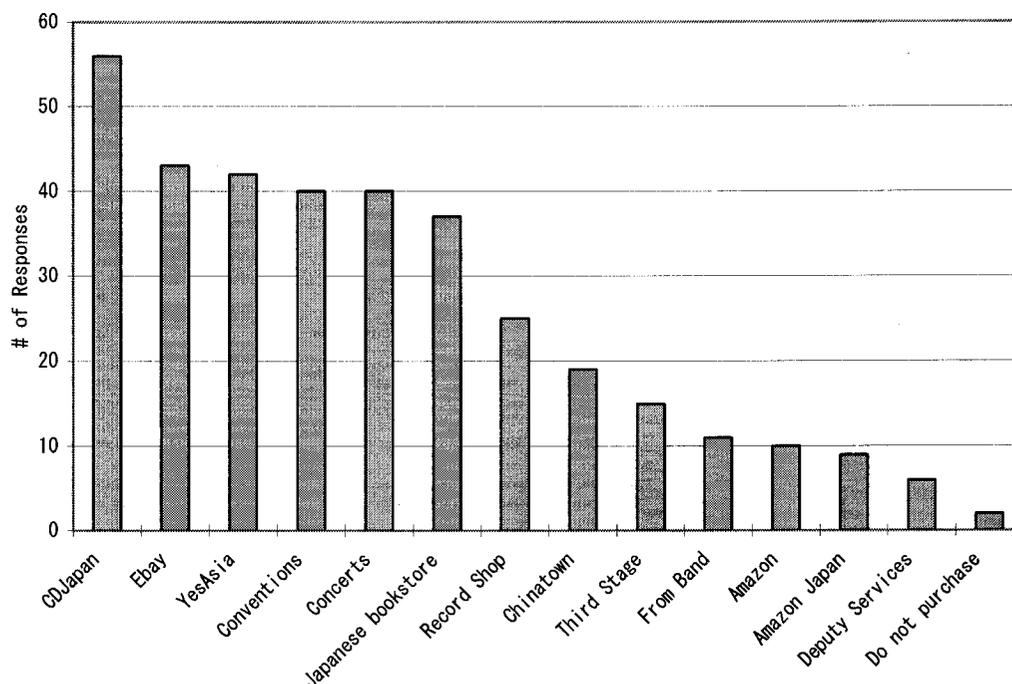
70 percent of questionnaire participants were from North America. Fans in the United States were spread throughout 18 different states with a small concentration of people in California (14 responses out of 45). This is contrasted with Canada where there is a large concentration of fans located in Ontario (17 responses out of 25).

Graph 3: 'Participatory' Activities in J-rock Fan Culture



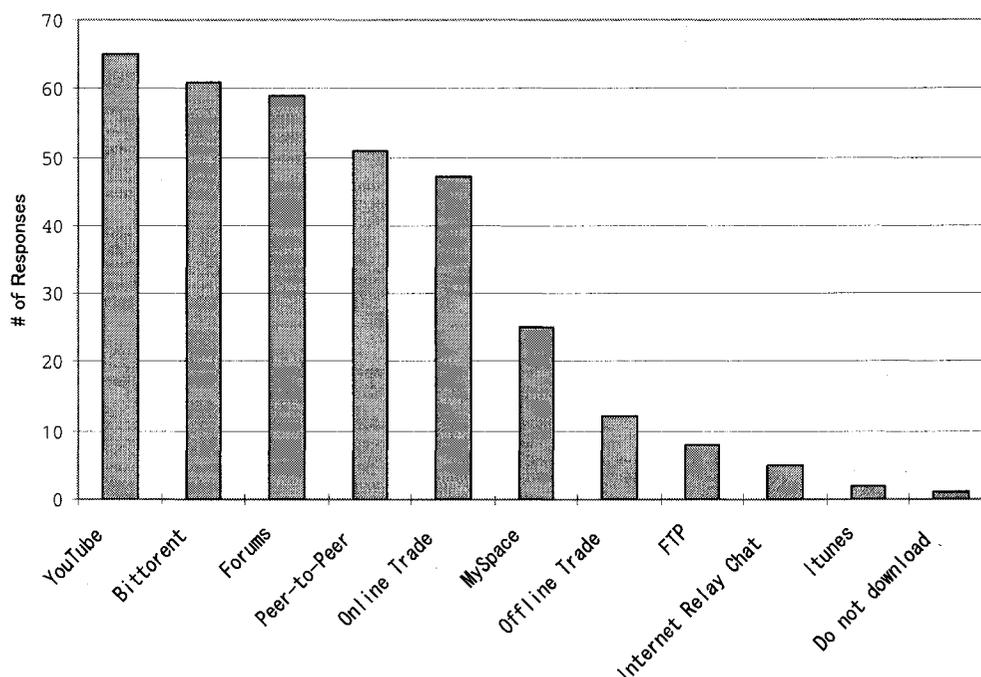
'Participatory' fan activities tend to be dominated by women, but there is a considerable amount of men who are involved in J-rock fan activities as well. In the questionnaire, it was possible to choose more than one response. Running a J-rock fan website was the top response, followed by cosplay, or costume play in which fans recreate the stage costumes of J-rock musicians, and fan art. 'Forum Creator / Mod' indicates that the person is engaged in creating a web forum relating to J-rock and/or maintaining the forum by moderating discussions. Roleplaying is a group activity where fans pretend to be, or roleplay, a certain J-rock musician. 'Zines' are self-produced print magazines that are usually photocopied and are distinguished from *dōjinshi*, or fan comics. Interestingly, there are a large number of fans (31 responses) who are not involved in 'participatory' activities yet they still consider themselves J-rock fans. Fan activities are important but are not indicative of a person's identity of a fan and their participation in J-rock virtual communities, which can take other forms such as sharing mp3s or providing information.

Graph 4: Where Fans Purchase Official Merchandise



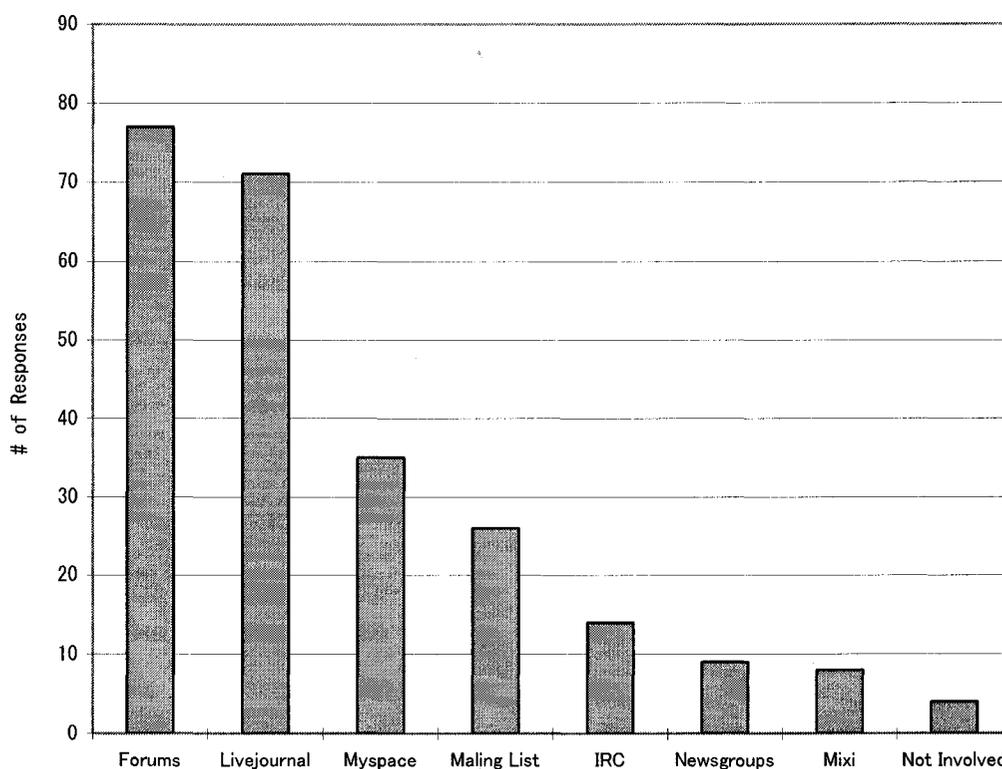
When purchasing J-rock related merchandise, fans rely heavily on mail order through Internet sites such as CDJapan, a music retailer based in Japan, and Ebay, an auction site. Other online retailers include Yes Asia, Amazon, Amazon Japan, and Third Stage, a brick-and-mortar independent music shop in Japan. Conventions and concerts are also popular places to buy J-rock related products and are an indication of how J-rock music is becoming more accessible in North America outside of the Internet. If this questionnaire was conducted five years ago, perhaps these options would not have garnered so many responses. Japanese bookstores refer to physical stores located in North America, indicating the questionnaire participant is located in or near a metropolitan area such as Los Angeles or Seattle. There were many other responses not included on this graph because they received only one response. These included online retailers like J-pop House and other music stores located in Japan.

Graph 5: How Fans Access J-rock Media on the Internet



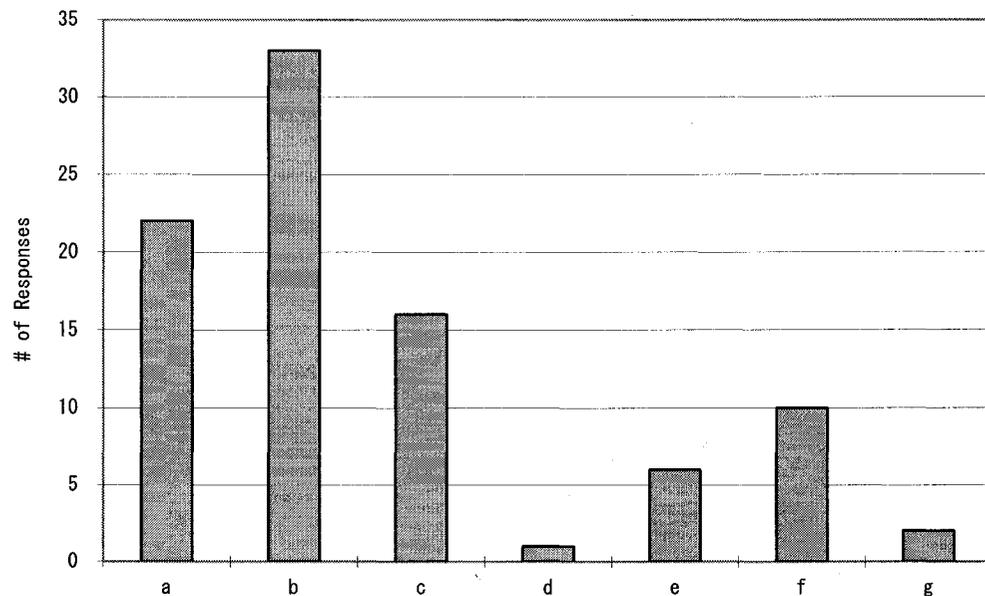
Many people have learned about J-rock and became fans after downloading related music files and video files on the Internet. Fans rely on downloads to learn about new artists and to sample new music releases. With the exception of iTunes, fans are primarily downloading J-rock media files for free and are sharing these files with others. As indicated by the graph, many fans use Youtube, a streaming video site, to view J-rock videos that have been uploaded by other fans. Bittorent is also a very popular download program in which, instead of relying on one central distributor, recipients act as distributors as they provide data to newer recipients thus reducing the burden on any individual source. The category 'Peer-to-Peer' on the graph represents other computer programs such as Limewire and WinMX.

Graph 6: Kinds of J-rock Virtual Communities J-rock Fans Participate In



Web-based forums remain the most popular type of virtual community that J-rock fans involved in either as a participant or observer. Livejournal, a social networking website, is also very popular as well as Myspace. Mailing lists, IRC, and newsgroups used to be popular with the older group of fans but have since waned in popularity as web forums and groups on Livejournal gained in popularity. Mixi is a social networking site that is based in Japan, and those who use Mixi tend to have some knowledge of the Japanese language.

Graph 7: Feeling of Community on the Internet



For this question, which asked them if they felt they belonged to a J-rock online community, participants were asked to choose from these following options:

- a. Yes, I feel I am part of a community and am currently actively participating in it.
- b. Yes, I feel I am part of a community even though I am more of a lurker or seldom participate.
- c. No, I am a lurker and do not feel that I am part of a community.
- d. No, I do not lurk and am not a part of a community at all.
- e. No, I used to be part of a community but am not anymore.
- f. I don't know.
- g. No response.

A lurker is someone who observes a virtual community who seldom or never contributes. As indicated by this graph, 55 percent of questionnaire participants felt that belonged to a J-rock online community. There are a larger number of lurkers than active participants. 16 percent saw themselves as lurkers who have no sense of belonging with any community. There were six people who felt that they used to be part of a community but are no longer involved; they are most likely long time fans. There were ten people that chose option (f), suggesting that there are a number of fans who are unsure of how to categorize their interactions with online J-rock communities.

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