

UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Neuman, William Lawrence

Understanding research / W. Lawrence Neuman. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-205-47153-9

ISBN-10: 0-205-47153-6

1. Social sciences—Research. 2. Social sciences—Methodology. 3. Sociology—Research.
 4. Sociology—Methodology. I. Title.
- H62.N3882 2009
300.72—dc22

2008015369

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 CKV 12 11 10 09

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EXAMPLE RESEARCH PROPOSAL, QUALITATIVE EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ANIME FANS IN THE UNITED STATES

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH TOPIC

Anime, or Japanese-origin animation, has become widely popular among some teens and young adults. Enthusiasts watch many hours of the films, collect the films, read magazines about characters and films, attend fan conventions, create Internet sites with fan information, and dress up as their favorite characters. While the public might be familiar with a few box-office hits, such as *Spirited Away* or children's cartoons, there is an entire world of fans in their teens through twenties who avidly follow anime.

A few studies have been conducted on the cinematic form and industry of Japanese animation and its spill-over to Japanese popular culture products, but almost nothing is written about the anime fan subculture in America. It appears to have arisen in 1990s and greatly expanded during the early 2000s. Casual observation suggests it is about equally among popular both genders and all ethnic-racial groups. It primarily attracts young people from the pre-adolescence and early teens (11–15) through early adulthood (25–28). Apparently, children discover the Japanese-style cartoons, and some become attracted to more sophisticated animation forms as well as video game spin offs.

The scant journalistic commentary on anime fans implies that many are “social misfits” or “geeks.” They do not cause trouble or break laws, but they do not fit in with mainstream peers. Many U.S. fans have self-adopted the Japanese term *otaku* (which translates as an obsessed misfit/geek and has negative connotations) as a badge of honor. Some apparently excel at academics, but few appear seriously involved in sports or other social activities common for their age group. There is speculation is that these young people are bright and pulled into a fantasy world that offers rapid action escape, adventure, morality tales, and intrigue. Somewhat socially separated from peers, they apparently seek out others with the same interest. While most appear socially adjusted and operate in daily life without serious difficulties, a few withdraw and devote more time in the fantasy world of animation than in reality. Reactions by parents and other adults who work with young people (teachers, librarians) are not known.

There are many forms of anime. Most genres have an adventure-fantasy theme, but some offer elaborate alternative worlds, and others are very violent or graphically pornographic. With little formal adult or institutional support, the fans seek one another out to form clubs at schools, libraries, or community centers at which they watch and discuss their favorite characters and tales. They organize conventions at the state, regional, or national level. The role of the anime production and distribution industry in these is unknown. At the conventions, they discuss and

analyze the animation stories and also engage in dress-up or “cosplay” (a Japanese term for costume play). It appears that many young people dress as their favorite characters then admire one another’s costumes and interact in ways that mimic the character. There are many products (posters, clothing, trinkets) sold to fans but little is known about the people who produce and sell these products.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND PROCEDURE

1. Research Objective

This is an exploratory, qualitative study, in which we seek to describe the anime fan culture. Our goal is to gather preliminary information that can be used for a future study.

2. Research Participants

The principal investigator and/or trained assistant will locate anime fans at clubs, anime conventions, and through referrals. The exact number is not clear since this is an exploratory and uncharted area. Additional fans will be located using purposive and snowball (referral) sampling. We hope to locate a least 30 fans for interviews. The age, race, gender make-up is unknown but will probably involve an equal mix of gender, all racial-ethnic groups, and persons aged 13 to 30 years. Persons under the age of 13 will be excluded.

3. Research Procedure

The principal investigator and/or trained adult college student assistants will personally observe fans in public places using participant observation techniques, conduct informal small talk-conversations, and make arrangements to interview participants at a later time. We may take a few brief notes (such as a person’s name and address or phone number) in the field setting, but take extensive notes of the club activities and convention events after the observation.

While at meetings and conventions, we will gather names for future interviews or conduct interviews after club meetings or during conventions. The interviews will be open-ended and tape-recorded. See Appendix for questions/topics in the interviews. Prior to interviewing or tape-recording, we will explain the purpose of the study to participants and tell them that their involvement is voluntary. We will collect the names of participants but hold them in confidence. Personal identifiers (age, gender, etc.) will be released to the public in a way that protects the identity of participants. Because some anime fans may be under the age of 18, we will obtain parental permission prior to interviews.

We expect interviews to vary in length (ten minutes to an hour) and may take place on more than one occasion in a semi-private location (e.g., room alcove, table or booth in a restaurant). Interview questions will not be fixed prior to interviewing but will follow a general list of topics (see below). We may ask different participants different questions based on their early responses. We will listen to tape recordings and take notes, but not transcribe the interviews. We may take photos, with permission, of conventions and participants, and will collect artifacts (e.g., announcements, brochures on conventions, etc.). We will document the types of products (shirts, posters, etc.) sold to fans at the conventions to identify patterns and trends.

4. Anticipated Results

As an exploratory study into a relatively unknown area, we can only speculate about possible results. We will describe anime fan activities (clubs, conventions, etc.) and characteristics of the fans we interview. We will identify repeated themes and patterns

within the clubs/conventions and examine themes in anime fan conversations, and about fan social activities. We will use the results to develop a more systematic study into the anime subculture.

5. Schedule and Budget

Schedule

Months 1–2	Locate fan clubs and conventions and scan Internet sites.
Months 3–4	Visit clubs and conventions, interview fans.
Months 5–6	Assemble and organize collected materials and field notes to analyze them.

Budget

Supplies

- notebooks
- tape recorder and supplies (batteries)

Travel

- To clubs and conventions

APPENDIX

Questions in the interviews will include the following topics:

- What is your age? If in college, what is your major and GPA?
- Do you have a part-time job, what is it?
- What are your career goals and aspirations for the future?
- What is your favorite anime film/character? Has this changed over time?
- At what age did you first develop an interest in anime? Explain, please.
- What got you interested in anime?
- Have your interests/favorites changed over time?
- About how many hours per week do you watch anime?
- How many anime films do you personally own?
- How often do you get together with friends to discuss anime?
- Of all those who you consider close friends, how many follow anime?
- Do you engage in cosplay or other anime social activities?
- What other hobbies or interests do you have besides anime?
- If you have social activities, what proportion are centered on anime?
- About how much money do you spend on anime per month?
- Do you have any other Japan-related interests other than anime?
- Do you have friends who were once interested in anime but dropped out?
- What do you and your anime friends talk about?
- What interests you in anime, how does it make you feel?
- Do you ever get very angry or upset watching anime?
- What types of anime do you like? Dislike?
- What types do you feel excited by or bored by?
- What do you think about people who do not like anime?
- Do you watch/play video games related to anime?
- In general, what type of student are you?
- In what ways, if any, does anime relate to your school work?
- Do you have any other hobbies or interests based on your anime interest?
- Do you think you will always love anime? Why or why not?
- Do you encourage people younger than yourself to learn about anime?
- How would you describe your relations with your parents?
- Does anime relate to your sexuality and interest in sex in any way?

QUESTION TOPICS FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS (18 AND OLDER) ONLY

- Do you currently consume alcohol or recreational drugs while viewing anime?
- Did you consume alcohol or recreational drugs while viewing anime when you were younger, under 18?
- Of your sexual partners, do many share your interest in anime?
- Do you get sexually aroused when you watch anime?

EXAMPLE RESEARCH PROPOSAL A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF ANIME ENTHUSIASTS IN THE UNITED STATES

INTRODUCTION AND THEORY

We all “consume” many popular cultural products, such as media forms (e.g., video or music), food dishes, electronic devices, and so forth. Most achieve a mass distribution, but some are specialized. Specialized products can attract a small number of people who become enthusiasts. At times, the enthusiasts develop social relations with one another, exchange information, and discuss product details. More than being casual consumers, their interest includes studying, collecting, and becoming experts on the products. By communicating and interacting, they might develop a distinct subculture around the products. A cultural product subculture is likely to develop when the cultural product is unusual or obscure, requires special knowledge, or has devotees in a geographic region or specific age group.

Early in subculture formation, the devotees may meet to exchange information, create publications, or form clubs. Fans set themselves apart from “outsiders” unfamiliar or not yet entranced by the product. Their skill and expertise with the product helps them develop self-esteem and gain respect from their like-minded peers. Even more than other cultural products, media forms change “fashion” very quickly. Young people tend to be more interested in new media that appeared in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. With fewer family or job responsibilities and a disposable income, young people are the primary consumers of popular media and may develop a “fan” following around specific products, artists, musicians, or a genre. With globalization, some cultural productions, and particularly new media, are shared across international borders and marketed to people in many countries. The cultural products are part of a developing international youth culture.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study examines the U.S. fans of the cultural media product Japanese animation, or anime. Artists, writers, and producers in Japan create anime. It has a “different” foreign or exotic look compared to most American-created animated media. Compared to traditional U.S. animation, Japanese anime is more diverse, has more complicated plots and developed characters, and appeals to a wider age range. Anime takes some themes from Japan and builds on Japanese settings or situations that are not widely known in the United States. This study looks at several questions about anime:

1. Does anime with its “foreignness” attract people who feel somewhat outside the U.S. cultural mainstream?

2. Are males and females attracted to different aspects or themes in anime that relate to emerging gender issues?
3. Over time do anime fans develop an interest in the country or culture of its origin, Japan?

Each research question has broader implications. With globalization, more products from other countries for people are available. It could be that some people that are not part of a somewhat homogenized mainstream culture find foreign products more attractive and a way to express their feelings of difference or individuality. One aspect of a foreign cultural product is that they might offer an alternative set of social relations or cultural viewpoint, even if it is not realistic or easy to act upon. When a cultural product of foreign origin includes some elements of the foreign culture or country, avid consumers of the product may develop an interest in the foreign country or culture as an ancillary effect of their devotion and interest in the cultural product.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies of anime productions have documented the themes and situations borrowed from Japanese culture in the stories, characters, and situations (see references). Anime films fall into a set of categories (fantasy, adventure, and so forth) and is somewhat differentiated by age and gender. Both male and female characters are often shown with superpowers, and changing or ambiguous gender of characters is present in several anime series (reference). Other studies of the anime industry emphasize its rapid growth and connection to other media, Japanese-style comics and video games (reference). A few theorists emphasized anime as part of an transnational youth culture (reference).

Only two studies (see reference) have looked at anime fans. One unpublished study found that college student anime fans were first attracted to anime but knew very little about Japan or had little interest in Japan. Another study that was a doctoral dissertation found that while many anime fans fit a “geek” or “nerd” stereotype, this was not universal. All did share a strong interest in media (watching film) and related media product (video games), and most began at a young age.

HYPOTHESES

- HY 1: Persons with fewer “mainstream” hobbies or interests, and with fewer “mainstream” close friends are likely to be stronger anime fans.
- HY 2: Female anime fans identify more with androgynous/ambiguous gendered characters than male fans.
- HY 3: Intense and committed anime fans are the most likely to want to learn about Japanese culture, learn the Japanese language, and/or wish to visit the country of Japan.

METHOD

1. Sample

The *population* is self-identified anime fans between the ages of 13 and 26. A fan is defined as someone who attends club meetings or a convention that is focused on anime, or who describes his or her main hobby as watching anime films, dressing and acting as anime characters, and/or talking with others anime enthusiasts about anime films.

We will draw a stratified random sample of 200 fans from university, school, and community anime clubs in the area and conventions. First, we will identify ten anime clubs or conventions and attend multiple meetings to obtain lists of members or attendees. Next, we will create a *sampling frame* that has the names, ages, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails of the members, attendees, and self-described fans at the clubs or conventions. Next, we will divide the sampling frame into two age groups: (1) fans aged 13–18, and (2) those aged 19–26. Finally, we will draw a random sample of 100 names from each age group.

We will contact each sampled person to set up an interview. For persons under 18 years of age, we will use a two-stage process. First, we will contact the sampled person and request the name, address, and phone number of a parent or legal guardian. Before scheduling an interview, we will mail the parent or legal guardian an informed consent form that explains the study and asks permission to interview the legal minor along with a stamped return envelope. We will telephone parents who fail to respond in seven days to make an oral request and offer a second informed consent form.

If we cannot contact or obtain permission to interview a sampled name after six tries using phone, regular mail, and e-mail, we will randomly draw a replacement name from the same age-stratified sampling frame until we have 200 people who agree to be interviewed.

2. Data Collection Procedure

We will conduct face-to-face or telephone interviews with each respondent. We estimate that about one-half will be face-to-face and one-half by telephone, depending on logistics and scheduling. We will ask permission to tape record all telephone interviews. After obtaining permission to record, we will read an informed consent statement prior to interviewing. For face-to-face interviews, we will ask each respondent to sign an informed consent form. Informed consent will be obtained for persons under 18 in addition to a parent or guardian consent form.

We will conduct the face-to-face interviews in any public place (school grounds, shopping mall, or restaurant) but without another person participating and no one listening in. After completing a questionnaire, we will offer to send a copy of the report to a respondent and provide contact information should he or she have further questions. We will number and store the questionnaires and begin to enter data from each questionnaire into a statistical computer program after the first twenty are completed.

We anticipate spending 10 minutes per interview locating and arranging for the interview, and the interview itself to take about 15 minutes to complete. We estimate about 20 minutes to travel to and meet with people for each face-to-face interview and 20 minutes to transcribe each of the telephone interviews. To complete the 200 interviews it will take about 33 hours for locating and scheduling, 50 hours for actual interviewing, and 67 hours for traveling and transcribing.

3. Variable Measurement

We will create three general measures by combining multiple survey questions to measure: (1) being a “nerd” or “geek” or being outside the mainstream of U.S. culture, (2) being a committed anime fan based on years of watching anime, spending time with anime and other fans, and expressing a strong interest in anime, and (3) having an interest in learning about Japan and Japanese culture. We anticipate the questionnaire will have about 40 items. Examples of some preliminary questions to be in the final questionnaire are listed below.

Variable Name	Questionnaire Item
1. Gender	Are you, ____ Male ____ Female ____ GBLT
2. Age	How old are you now? ____
3. School	Do you now attend school? If No Next, If Yes, what school/grade ____
4. Start	At what age did you first start watching anime regularly? ____
5. Games	Do you play video games? If No skip to #8, If Yes, how often? ____ daily ____ 2–3 times a week ____ weekly ____ less often
6. Games 1	What are your favorite two games (1) _____
7. Games 2	(2) _____
8. Own	How many anime DVDs do you personally own? ____
9. Often	How often do you watch anime? ____ every day ____ 3–5 times a week ____ about once a week ____ several times a month ____ less than once a month
10. Where	Where do you usually watch anime films? _____
11. Friends	Of your five best friends, how many are anime fans? ____
12. Alone	Think back to the last 10 times you watched an anime film. How many of those 10 times were you watching it alone? ____
13. Favorite1	Name your four favorite anime films of all time, (1) _____
14. Favorite2	(2) _____
15. Favorite3	(3) _____
16. Favorite4	(4) _____
17. Character1	Name your two favorite anime characters of all time, (1) _____
18. Character2	(2) _____
19. Products	Do you own any anime-related products, such as posters, clothing, stuffed animals, etc.? If No skip to #21,
20. Type	If Yes, what products do you own, type and number? _____
21. Cosplay	Do you ever dress up in a costume as an anime character? ____ Yes ____ No
22. Japan1	Have you ever read a book about Japanese history or society?
23. Japan2	Have you ever traveled to Japan? If Yes #25, If No,
24. Japan3	How interested are you in traveling to Japan? ____ Extremely ____ Very ____ Somewhat ____ A little ____ Not at All
25. Club	Do you belong to an Anime Club, No ____ Yes ____
26. Conven1	Have you ever attended an anime convention? If No skip to #28, If Yes,
27. Conven2	How many conventions have you attended in the past three years? ____
28. FriendG	Of your five closest friends, how many are your same gender? ____
29. Internet	How often do you go to anime related sites on the Internet? ____ Never ____ once a month ____ several x a month ____ Weekly ____ Daily or more
30. Magazine	Do you subscribe to an anime magazine? ____ Yes ____ No

Time Schedule

Month 1	Obtain IRB approval, continue literature review, prepare draft of complete questionnaire, develop list of anime clubs and conventions
Months 2-3	Visit anime clubs and conventions to collect names and create sampling frame, pilot test questionnaire
Month 4	Draw a random sample of names and contact under 18 sample for parental permissions, revise questionnaire, begin to schedule interviews
Months 5-7	Contact and arrange for all interviews, begin interviewing
Month 8	Complete last interviews, and start to code data into computer program
Month 9	Finish coding, and analyze data using statistics program
Month 10	Write up results as a report and present findings

Budget Estimate**Supply and Service Expenses**

- Printing and postage
- Tape recorder and supplies
- Telephone

Travel Expenses

- To go to anime clubs and conventions
- To go to interviews
- To go to professional meeting to present final report

Labor Expenses

- General clerical help
- Interviewing help
- Tape transcription help
- Data entry help
- Statistical analysis