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### **Japanese Animation: Its Effect on Malaysian Undergraduate Students**

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# Japanese Animation: Its Effect on Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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## Abstract

Japanese animation or anime is one of the most popular and well-received types of Japanese popular cultures, translated into various languages, rendering these globally renowned. A plethora of studies has shown that interest in anime has led students to start learning the Japanese language. However, to date, studies examining the influence of anime consumption on Japanese language students, particularly in Malaysian contexts, are scarce.

The present study aims to identify the effect of anime consumption on Malaysian undergraduates who enrolled in beginner Japanese language courses at three public universities in Malaysia. A total of 150 undergraduate students who are interested in anime participated in this study. The data was collected using an online survey and was coded and categorized by themes. The data revealed that most students are influenced by the characters, settings, and storylines of anime. The main positive effects are; broadening their knowledge on Japan and its culture, deepening their interest on Japanese language, strengthening relationships with family members and friends, releasing stress, instilling positive moral values and enhancing imagination and creativity. However, poor time management, negative moral values, negative emotion, antisocial behavior, escapism and buying characters' goods are mentioned as the main adverse effects. The results of this study gave insightful perspectives to those working in Japanese language and cultural pedagogies.

**Keywords:** Anime, effect, Japanese language learners, undergraduate

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## Background

Anime is the abbreviation of the Japanese term for animation. Emerging from Japan 40 years ago, anime has successfully penetrated the global market and has become a worldwide phenomenon (Ng 2002; Noh 2017). Anime has been acclaimed for its originality, which showcases the intricacies unique to Japanese culture and content. These differences are stark enough from the mainstream animation to the point where the term 'Japanimation' is used to describe animations produced in Japan. One of the most distinctive features of 'Japanimation' or anime is the character design, where the characters usually have big eyes and unique hairstyles that are unconventionally colored. The storylines in anime are detailed, complicated and continuous with

themes ranging from fantasy, daily life, cooking, action, adventure, martial art, sports, romantic drama, comedy, and same-sex relationships. Despite being seen as a genre either too childish or too violent and pornographic, the popularity of anime has been sustained through showcases of anime films and series on television, uploads of episodes on YouTube, online games, commercials and anime characters' merchandise (Pinili 2017).

Research on learners of Japanese language has strongly emphasized the link between anime and Japanese language education (Fukunaga 2006; Mori and Takeuchi 2016; Rokiah Pae 2017). However, research on the effect of anime consumption on students of Japanese, particularly in Malaysian contexts, is still scarce. This study aims to shed light on the positive and negative impact of anime consumption on Malaysian Japanese language students.

## Literature Review

Interest in Japanese popular culture such as anime, manga and computer games mentions these facets as motivational factors that trigger students to begin taking Japanese courses at university (Mori and Takeuchi 2016; Rokiah 2017). A survey by the Japan Foundation (The Japan Foundation 2013) found that the motivation to learn Japanese language comes more from the learners' interest in Japanese popular culture than any future career prospects. This phenomenon may be explained by Japan's economic drop, which led to fewer job opportunities requiring proficiency in Japanese language. Hence, Japanese language classrooms are no longer filled with students from business majors, but rather, are replaced by avid anime watchers, manga readers and Nintendo players (Hayashi 2009).

In a qualitative study by Rokiah Pae (2017) on Malaysian undergraduate Japanese language learners, anime came up as the top Japanese popular culture that triggered learners to start learning the language. Rokiah Pae interviewed 24 beginning Japanese language students from five national universities in Malaysia, and found that the majority started watching anime at childhood. Most watch anime and their familiarity with the language motivates them to take the courses thus. Apart from interesting anime characters and motivating storylines, the learners also enjoy listening to animation theme songs. Among the animations mentioned in the interviews were *Swords Art Online*, *Steins Gate*, *Attack on Titan*, *Kuroko no Basket*, *Crayon Shinchan*, *One Piece*, *Gundam*, *Doraemon*, *Digimon*, *Detective Conan*, *Initial D*, *Naruto* and *Tonari no Tottoro*.

Anime is not only used as a source of entertainment but also serves as a learning tool. The Japanese language learners use it to gain new knowledge on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, writing systems and culture. In a study conducted by Mamat, Abdul Halim, Mansor and Abdul Rashid's (2018), approximately 79% of respondents indicated that the consumption of manga and anime helped in enhancing their Japanese language competencies. Listening to the repetitive dialogues assisted the students to memorize the meaning of the words, phrases or sentences and to understand the scene. Anime also creates awareness of Japanese linguistic features such as men and women's languages, plain and polite forms, phrases, vocabulary, sentence structures, pronunciation and intonation as students focus on anime dialogues (Chan, Wong and Ng 2017). Most of the respondents rely on subtitles to understand the story. Respondents also learn the 'plain' or casual forms that are different from the polite form that is used based on social status. Through manga and anime, respondents also learned new linguistic features that are not taught in their Japanese university classes. Moreover, from written exercises, students who favor manga and anime perform better as they have the ability to distinguish the suitable vocabularies, phrases or sentences for different contexts (Roslina Mamat et al. 2018).

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The study was conducted at three public universities in Malaysia. Purposive sampling was used for data collection. A total of 150 students consisting of 38 males and 112 females who enrolled in basic Japanese language courses participated in this study. These courses are a general university requirement and enroll students from a wide array of other disciplines. About 130 (86.7%) students indicated that Japanese animation is a major motive to study Japanese. More than half (56.7%) of the students started watching anime before entering their secondary schooling years, one third (33.3%) started during their secondary school, while 4% started during their matriculation/college years. Only 6% started watching after entering university.

### *Instrument*

The students were given an open-ended online questionnaire using google forms. This questionnaire has two sections: Section A asked about the participants' demographics such as their gender, ethnicity and institution, whereas section B consists of two open-ended questions, regarding the positive and negative effects of watching anime.

### *Data Collection*

The data were gathered via google forms at the end of the semester. Students were given the link to the form by their respective Japanese language instructors, and they were asked to fill in the survey during their free time. The students were allowed to write their responses in Malay or English, predicated on which language they are comfortable with.

### *Data Analysis*

Initially, 153 students completed the survey. However, out of 153 students, one student submitted two responses, and another two did not answer the open-ended questions, resulting in their participation being deleted from any further analysis. The final analysis consisted of 150 responses, and the data were coded thematically.

## Methodology

### *Positive Effect of Anime Consumption*

Students' descriptions of the effects of anime consumption revealed several themes. The main positive effects of anime consumption can be categorized into six major themes: (a) broadening their knowledge on Japan and its culture, (b) deepening interest and knowledge on Japanese language, (c) strengthening the relationship with family members and friends, (d) releasing stress, (e) instilling positive moral values and (f) enhancing imagination and creativity. Table 1 shows the positive influence of anime consumption on the Japanese language learner and examples of responses.

Theme	Students' Response
a Broadening knowledge on Japan and its culture	I can learn about Japanese culture and other countries culture too. Understand their culture more. Some of them [anime] told me how to deal with people and stuff that happen around me
b Deepen interest and knowledge on Japanese language	I can learn new words. I'm studying Japanese right now, and it's an advantage for me if I can understand the anime without the subtitle. Able to understand Japanese a little. Able to listen and speak some words. It motivates me to learn Japanese language because I want to watch anime without translation
c Strengthen the relationship with family members and friends	Appreciate the friendship. Look for quality, not quantity. The importance of strengthening the bond among family and friends I started to realize the need to appreciate our friends more and protect the bond we have made Make more close friends with the same interest and strengthen my relationship with my siblings. I realize the importance of friends regardless of during good or bad times or when we are in need of help
d Release stress	Able to think calmer and can release tension due to study It just makes my life and day happier and less stress It allows me to escape from my troubles for a little while. I like to be in the anime world
e Instill positive moral values	I am more motivated in whatever I do Determination in achieving an objective Learn more about appreciating our lives There are reasons in everything that happened There is some good influence from anime such as Naruto where the anime offers various positive moral value such as helping each other, never give up, love and many others. Dare to take risks which is essential in being successful. This encourages me to make decision and be brave to face the consequences of my decision. I learn not to give up easily, appreciate people around me and work hard until succeed. Personality and thinking become better and more mature. I can learn good moral value that should be in our lives, such as keep trying after failing, do not blame others, do not bully others, and so on. It enables me to shift my attitude to a more positive note by observing ethical values from the anime.
f Enhance imagination and creativity	It motivates me and makes my imagination more creative (widening the horizon) It let you expand your imagination Increase creativity in writing stories or drawing,

Table 1: Positive Effect of Anime Consumption

### *Negative Effects of Anime Consumption*

Out of 150 students, about one-third of the learners answered “none,” “nothing,” “no comment,” “I am not sure,” “Nothing I’m aware of,” or left the answer column blank when asked about the negative effects of anime viewing. Table 2 shows the negative influence of anime consumption on the Japanese language learner and response examples. The negative effects can be categorized mainly into six themes: (a) poor time management, (b) negative moral values, (c) escapism, (d) negative emotion or thought, (e) antisocial behavior, and (f) buying characters’ goods.

Theme	Students' Response
a Poor Time Management	Unable to finish work on time Time management. Binge-watching for a whole week! Maybe getting too immerse with the anime and hence not getting much work done. I spent too much time watching anime compared to doing other things It makes me addicted to watching it, and it makes me procrastinate

		Couldn't manage to adhere to the schedule due to binge-watching.
b	Negative Emotion/Thought	I feel frustrated over the events that happen in the story, and it had influenced my emotions toward others. Too much of negative thinking
c	Escapism	Sometimes it might be too nostalgic, and I feel sad being a grown-up It makes me daydream when I tried to compare reality and fiction.
	Instill Negative Moral Value	Maybe some vulgar language such as cursing There are cultural differences It somehow desensitizes you if you've been watching too many gore/violence anime Negative thinking, depression, tendency to be violent, learning vulgar Japanese language, and wearing sexy clothing.
e	Antisocial behavior	I rarely interact with other people. I spend most of my time watching anime. I love anime. More like become solo and solve anything on my own. I rarely go out or doing outdoor activities because I always waste time watching anime.
f	Buying characters' good	I am easily influenced to buy anime goods. Wasting money by buying "merchandise."
	Other	I always make sentences with the wrong structure in Japanese language. (language) Worsening eyesight (health)

Table 2: Negative Effects of Anime Consumption

## Discussion

The results show that anime consumption affects the majority of learners positively rather than negatively. This is evidenced by that only 2/3 of respondents listed the negative impact as opposed to almost all listing the positive effects. The positive effects listed for anime consumption include the ability of learners to broaden their knowledge and to deepen their interest in not only Japanese culture but also the culture of other countries. Moreover, the time spent watching anime together with family members and friends serves as a steppingstone in strengthening their bond. The portrayal of positive values such as the determination to succeed, self-reflection, helping others and gratefulness, in anime, serve as motivation for the viewers to become a better version of themselves.

However, among the negative influences mentioned, poor time management ranks in first place. The students are aware of the long time they spent on anime consumption and its consequences such as inability to deliver other scheduled tasks on time, but are unable to control themselves. This may be due to the immersive nature of anime, and they hence become willing binge-watchers, which leads to addiction. The addiction, when indulged alone, may lead to less interaction with other humans to the extent that some learners become antisocial and prefer to be alone and stay at home. However, most of the students are not influenced to imitate the character of the anime or to feel the urge to have a collection of anime goods. This suggests that the students know their limitations and still have the ability to delineate between the world of reality and of the fantasy.

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted the positive and negative effect of anime consumption on Japanese language learners at the Malaysian public universities. The findings revealed both effects from the data. This suggests that anime have influenced the respondents' lives to some extent. These students' voices point out some critical considerations for the future of language education. According to Iwabuchi (2002), to cater to global taste, Japanese cultural products have shifted significantly from emphasizing the Japanese national context to global contexts. Hence, anime's contents are no longer specific to Japanese settings, making it an unsuitable platform to represent any real or authentic Japanese culture and identity. Therefore, there is a hidden danger in having

limited knowledge of Japan from anime alone. To avoid this stereotyping, Japanese language instructors may introduce authentic materials, not only in the form of anime but also in various forms such as movies, songs, newspaper articles, TV commercials, news, magazine advertisements and the like during teaching and learning. This will enable the learners to see how the Japanese language is used in real life. Using carefully selected authentic materials makes the class more enjoyable and exciting. Thus, it will appeal more strongly to learners' interests and at the same time, will expose learners to the salient aspects of broader usage of Japanese language. According to Matsumoto and Okamoto (2003), the structure of the Japanese language curriculum, which commonly focuses on polite form first may de-contextualized language in the textbooks. Therefore, by using a variety of authentic materials, the learners will be exposed to different language registers.

The results of this study gave insightful perspectives to those in the field of Japanese language education. However, room for further research remains. The data collected in the study was based on self-report and thus contained potential weaknesses such as the participant unwillingness to present themselves honestly. Efforts were made to increase the validity and reliability of the study by not requiring the students to answer questions on their demographics that may lead the researchers to identify students such as their name, age, faculty and email address. The impact of anime consumption can also be assessed via other alternative measures such as focus groups interviews or semi-structured interviews. Further study may investigate the differences in performance or motivation between anime fan learners and non-anime fan learners. It would also be interesting to explore the potential that anime might have in attracting and retaining learners.

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