

## JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON ROMANIAN CULTURAL SPACE

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of Japanese popular culture on Romania becomes obvious when we notice the increasing number of young enthusiasts of Japanese cultural products such as manga magazines or anime. In this social context of globalization and constant change, we are witnessing the emergence of a new type of Romanian cultural product – the Romanian manga magazine. Meanwhile, one community has emerged and developed systematically: Otaku community, represented by the Romanian fans of manga and anime. This community develops two particular social practices, Doujinshi and Cosplay, which we will analyze further. In this situation, Otaku could be considered a representative future subculture on the Romanian cultural scene. What are the social implications of Japanese popular culture in contemporary Romanian society?

**Keywords:** Japanese popular culture, Romanian manga, hybridization, interpretative communities, social and cultural practices.

### A BRIEF INTRODUCTION: JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE IN ROMANIA

Over the last three decades, Japanese popular culture products were exported, sold and consumed worldwide everywhere, from Asia through America and Europe. A wide variety of such products became available in shopping malls around the world, especially in big cities or metropolises.

Subsequently, this consumption trend was observed in Romanian national area where I noticed the increasing interest of Romanian public towards Japanese popular culture and the infusion of Japanese cultural products on the Romanian market. The objective of the present article is to analyze the impact of Japanese popular culture on the Romanian public. Therefore, the impact of Japanese culture

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on the Romanian public was analyzed from a double perspective: first of all, we must take into account the particular characteristics of the products and second of all, the particular traits of the region and the receiving local culture (Iwabuchi 1999). Economy, society, language, mentality – all these have a direct role in the reception and an obvious impact over the messages transmitted by Japanese products (Allen and Sakamoto 2006). Focusing the research on Japanese popular culture is motivated primarily by the interest manifested on a global or national level and, secondly, by the lack of similar Romanian research studies that could have served as a model for analysis. Therefore, this research is well motivated by the existing imbalance between Romanian public interest and Romanian academic studies about Japanese popular culture phenomenon. It is undeniable that Japanese popular culture has become topical in Romanian society: the trade of Japanese products has increased systematically at a global but also at a national level; at the same time, the consumer behavior has changed drastically.

The globalization and the development of mass-media and the technological boom gave free access to these products that until two decades ago were restricted to the commercialization solely in the Asian continent (Hidetoshi 1989). The only ones who had access to these type of products were only the Japanese natives and the Japanese language connoisseurs who were very few at that time (Schodt 1996). Once with technological progress, the speed distribution, the circulation, the consumption and the production have increased significantly (Schodt 1996). The ubiquity of Japanese popular culture products in everyday life demonstrates that this phenomenon is a topical and major issue (McGray 2002).

Whether or not Romanian young people are consuming the type of products, the majority of them can identify and distinguish the Japanese goods from others. Moreover, if we are talking about loyal and passionate consumers, they possess a consistent database about these products – release date, history, meanings and symbols, from where and how you can buy it and so on. So they become what we call ‘*Japanese popular culture experts*’, without being necessary to have any kind of academic expertise. They become at the same time the best “endorsers” of these products. The attraction of Western public to Japanese popular culture products can be explained taking into consideration the positive image that Japan has all over the world. Positive stereotypes associated with the Japan and with Japanese culture (professionalism, diligence, ambition, devotion, female beauty, tenderness, masculinity, honour, etc.) have contributed and boosted of Japanese popular culture worldwide (McGray 2002). These are just some of the most important characteristics of Japanese popular culture products that had a considerable impact at a global level.

The major cultural differences between Japanese and Western culture have also incited the Western public’s interest. This new model of popular culture products offered us totally new products, different in form and content from those previously known to the public (Kelts, 2006). Japanese subcultures also behave in

an extravagant way that cannot be linked or resembled to any western subcultures. Otaku, Cosplay, Gyarū, Visual Kei - all belong to a cultural universe unseen and unknown until now by the western consumer (Azuma 2009).

Despite all these categorical differences that played the role of magnets in attracting the public, products like 'anime' or 'manga' seem to be targeted not only to children, like American comics, but also to adult public. Japanese products contain messages, themes, symbols, universal values that can be recognized only by a mature public (Kinsella 1998). In this way, the consumers were able to easily identify themselves with the fictional characters and with their dilemmas and conflicts (Okabe 2012).

The study of Japanese popular culture products in Romania becomes essential because the speed of consumption is very high. The Romanian public is more than interested in such a cultural model. The topicality and the implications of Japanese popular culture in Romanian cultural space can be easily proved by observing the rate of consumption that these Japanese products have on the Romanian market. Meanwhile, the Romanian consumers have put a continuous effort to distribute and to create similar products to the Japanese ones. So what the public does is more than to consume the products and pass to other ones. Their passion and their commitment to Japanese popular culture is so high that they convert their selves in creators for similar products. They come to a point where they 're-create' Japanese popular culture in Romanian cultural space. Because of the time gap, the local public acts differently compared to the American public. Romanian consumers manage their relationship with Japanese cultural products such as manga comics and anime in a different and unique manner, because they use different mass-media channels and they communicate using other technological means. However, in terms of consumer trends, the Romanian public follows closely the Western public.

## **OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

### **Objectives**

The objective of this research was to analyze the emergence and the evolution of Japanese popular culture in Romania.

We also mention two specific objectives underpinning this article. The first one is to identify and prove the existence of a new cultural hybrid, the 'Romanian manga' that we consider to be representative for the national market and to establish the cultural circuit that produced this new genre.

A second objective is to make a typology of Otaku community in Romania and to understand the relations, the multi-faceted and complex trajectories between Japanese popular culture and Romanian fans.

### **Research hypotheses**

The first hypothesis is that Romanian consumers of Japanese *popular culture* were transformed from being merely passive consumers to *active producers*. They create their own manga and their own art work inspired by Japanese cultural products.

According to the second hypothesis, Romanian manga is an independent product and it is more than a 'copy' or 'an imitation' of Japanese manga. Romanian manga sets apart and it is different from both Japanese and Western comics and it is unique and original, because the authors use the national and cultural heritage as a source of inspiration.

The last hypothesis refers to the fact that we are witnessing the 'globalization' of Otaku subculture and that the Romanian community acts similar to the original Japanese subculture. Therefore, it is *an interpretative community*.

### **Research methods**

The methods used are the qualitative content analysis, the open interview and the observation.

*The qualitative content analysis* was applied to a body consisting of the first 20 issues of the Romanian comic magazine 'Comics'. This magazine represents the main analysis corpus. We chose this method to demonstrate that the elected magazine is what we call '*Romanian manga*' which can be considered a visual genre par excellence. This new cultural genre appeared as a consequence of the influence exerted by Japanese popular culture over the national public. We opted for qualitative content analysis as a research method on the sole ground that our attention and our interest are geared towards the *content* of this magazine. By analyzing the content, we tried to identify several fundamental characteristics for this new cultural genre, the Romanian manga. Furthermore, we have been closely monitoring the meanings of the messages. This method helped us at the same time to create a cultural circuit for Japanese popular culture products and to establish in what stage Romanian manga develops. The qualitative content analysis underlined the originality and the unique status of what we call Romanian manga; even more, we understood Romanian manga in the context of a cultural circuit established by Japanese *popular culture* products in Romania. *The open interview* has been organized for three groups of subjects: the first category, the 'leaders' of the Otaku community. They have been involved in drawing Romanian manga magazines, organizing festivals, fairs and so on. Seven 'leaders' were randomly selected. A second category was for the anonymous members of this community and it totalled 100 people. The last category is representative for the educational sector, meaning manga design and it included only two Romanian manga teachers who teach in Japanese language and culture schools.

The advantage of this method is that it allowed us to reach different public segments. Using it, we were able to explore the perceptions of the interviewees. The elaborate answers helped us understand their views and their feelings toward

the Japanese popular culture products they were regularly consuming. Using this method along with the observation conducted in several popular culture events, we were able to follow the *historical evolution of Otaku* community in Romania and to characterize two *social practices* conducted by Otaku fans: Doujinshi and Cosplay. The reason we chose the observation as a third research method is because it helped us understand those two social and cultural practices mentioned before and to follow closely the conduct of Otaku members in various situations such as the festivals or specific exhibitions.

### ROMANIAN MANGA - A NEW TYPE OF CULTURAL HYBRID

Nowadays, in Romanian society, we witness the emergence of a new cultural hybrid. This product appeared as a result of the continuous Japanese influences over the Romanian public, a public that has its own cultural heritage. In these circumstances, the Romanian Manga becomes more than a copy of the traditional Japanese manga; thanks to the cultural heritage of the Romanian authors it is characterized by uniqueness and originality. In the global context, Japanese manga is generally considered within Japan a medium that comes in a wide variety of genres and styles, frequently behaves like a distinctive 'genre'. It is often written as 'Manga' in English-speaking countries—as part of a larger category of comics (Kern 2006). Undoubtedly, there are similarities between what we identified as Romanian manga and Japanese manga, when it comes to comparing the format, the visual structure, the stories, the messages or the symbols. At the same time, there are consistent features that prove that Romanian cultural heritage plays a key role in the establishment of this new type of cultural product.

Romanian manga breaks all patterns of production and it is different from old Romanian comic magazines like 'Păcală' or 'Harap – Alb' or from the typical American comics such as 'Batman', 'Superman', or 'Spiderman'. During the creation of Romanian manga, the authors were influenced not only by the Japanese comics or the American ones, but also by French comics like 'Asterisk and Obelix' or 'Tin-Tin'. This patchwork of influences becomes inevitable because, since their childhood, the consumers have been in contact with various comics, from all over the world. The qualitative content analysis was applied to the first 20 issues of the Romanian comic magazine 'Comics'. After taking into consideration the visual language and the visual drawing conventions, similar to the ones in Japanese manga, we come to the conclusion that this magazine can be easily considered an authentic Romanian manga. The magazine, created by avid consumers of manga, has the merit of reviving the Romanian printed comics market. Its number of readers has increased significantly, from 2,000 people for the first edition online to 60000 for the latest issue. The magazine is not created to target only children. The messages are clearly designed to also target the mature public, if we take into

consideration the philosophical, political, social or religious connotations of the messages. This Romanian manga is produced entirely by the members of Otaku community members. The content analysis proved that this product evolves as part of a *unique cultural circuit*, divided into several stages: transculturalisation, indigenization, hybridization and distribution / consumption / production.

By definition, the *transculturalisation* is the process by which a cultural form moves from one physical location to another where it interacts with and influences the local forms (language, food, music) and produces new cultural hybrids (Lull 2000). In this case, Japanese popular culture products ‘migrate’ and change their location to reach the Romanian cultural space. Here these products manage to interact with the local audience and to influence the consumers. The next phase is the *indigenization*: this is the process by which imported cultural materials are adapted to local cultural conditions. Here is the stage when we can analyze the perception of Romanian consumers towards original Japanese popular culture products (Lull 2000).

The *hybridization* is the third stage of this process, when the cultural hybrids appear. In this case, the cultural hybrid is the Romanian manga, a result of the influences exerted by Japanese popular culture on the Romanian public (Lull 2000). When it comes to distribution and marketing, local publishers have copied the Japanese advertising system: manga magazines can be purchased together with similar products, such as posters, t-shirts, mugs, watches, jewelry and crosswords (Lull 2000). All these items are sold in specialized shops or can be ordered online, although it is somewhat difficult. In terms of consumption, we noticed the expansion of consumer audiences in terms of age. Romanian Manga, like Japanese manga, manages to attract audiences including adults, not only children, unlike classical comics.

#### SIMILARITIES TO JAPANESE MANGA

After analyzing the content of the magazine ‘Comics’, we noticed that the visual language is similar to the one in Japanese manga (Iwabuchi 2002). In traditional Japanese manga, there are specific visual conventions and the same conventions can be observed in the Romanian magazine ‘Comics’. The existence of this similar ‘visual grammar’ led us to the conclusion that we are witnessing the appearance and the emergence of a new cultural genre, the Romanian manga. Of course Japanese manga industry has a significant advance, in comparison to Romanian manga. However, we can observe significant resemblances. Both of them address topics about everyday life – school, family, work, love and so on. On the opposite, American comics focus on the extraordinary and ignore the normality of our lives. Second of all, we can notice preferences for the same major themes. For example, both in Romanian and Japanese manga, the hero will fight and win

only because he is helped by his friends. In American comics, the hero (Batman, Superman and Spiderman) is all by himself. Family or various historic events are other common themes, while American comics do not exploit them at all. It is possible that this major difference comes as a consequence of mentality differences. Both Japanese and Romanian people are very proud of their history, their ancestors and their past. Third of all, in both Romanian and Japanese manga, there is a common visual language. It is more than probable that Romanian mangaka, the manga authors from Romania, have copied traditional manga visual style.

There are many graphic emblems, like sweeping lines to show motion and bubbles encapsulation text to show speech. Emotions are expressed in a similar manner. In conventional depictions of rage or anger, Romanian characters grow sharp fang and pointy claws while fire erupts behind them. Other common emblems are the sweat drops expressing embarrassment and nervousness. The depiction of the body is similar to the one on Japanese manga: big eyes, small lips, skinny body and hair in strange and abnormal colors. What is probably the most important resemblance lies in the content of the messages. Both Japanese and Romanian manga also target the mature public. The messages are reached in metaphors and profound symbols that can be understood only by a mature audience. American comics usually target only children.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANIAN MANGA**

At the same time, we identified several characteristics that we consider representative for the new genre of Romanian manga. These attributes are identity elements that show the national heritage and the uniqueness of this Romanian magazine, meaning what makes it Romanian, in this national manga. The first characteristic of Romanian manga is the presence of continuous references to national celebrities such as Gheorghe Hagi ('Comics', 2013) or historical figures: Ștefan cel Mare ('Comics', 2011) and Vlad Țepeș ('Comics', 2013). At the same time, in this Romanian manga, the authors refer to and use constantly famous Romanian literature: literary productions of George Bacovia (Ionescu 2013, 35), Nichita Stănescu, (Pătrașcu 2012, 33), Alexandru Macedonski (Ivan 2011, 6).

The usage of Romanian literary patrimony has been described by the coordinator Octav Ungureanu as a 'tribute to the Romanian spirit' and as an 'attempt to resurrect the most important cultural markers' ('Hyperliteratura', 5 November 2013). The third characteristic of the Romanian manga is the usage of Romanian fairytales as an inspiration source. The authors use popular Romanian fairytales and recreate the story in their manga. For example, the fairytale known as 'The story of Harap – Alb' by Ion Creangă becomes a manga in 'Harap Alb continues'. The authors reinvented the classical story and renamed the characters in order to fit the contemporaneous Romanian society. Beside 'The story of Harap –

Alb', another well-used fairytale is 'Prâslea the sturdy and the golden apples' by Petre Ispirescu (Surducan 2013, 33). Here, the author Maria Surducan uses the original story but writes and draws a different fairytale with a different ending and different names of the characters. In other cases, the authors prefer to create their own original fairytale and to put the story in a manga: 'A forgotten princess' by Raluca Zaharia (Zaharia 2011, 14) is a good example.

*Romanian myths and legends* also became a fertile source of inspiration for Romanian manga authors. In the short manga 'The legend of Dragobete', we also encounter Dochia, a famous Romanian mythical figure (Moldovan 2013, 18-19). The Romanian Saint figure, Dragobete is a usual presence in the manga 'Comics'. The 15<sup>th</sup> issue of 'Comics' magazine uses an appropriate motto to certify the Romanian origins and the cultural heritage of the magazine: 'Dragobete – an authorized portrait of the God. Melted snow from the Saint Dragobete/You can find only at Lardea the great priest' (Moldovan 2013, 18-19). We noticed immediately the presence of the Romanian Saint, Dragobete, the God of love, who was preferred by the author of the manga instead of Saint Valentine, the modern Saint of love. The ending of this short manga brings us a modern scene, where two close female friends encourage each other to celebrate Saint Dragobete, 'the true tradition' (the bolding belongs to the author of the manga). The same friends call Valentine's Day a 'nonsense and a commercial holiday'. They defy at the same time the modern tradition.

The fifth characteristic of the Romanian manga is the usage by the authors of a national language and Romanian specific expressions, proverbs, metaphors and so on. The next characteristics of Romanian manga 'Comics' is that it contains various columns adapted to the local space and to the most important topics and problems of the Romanian society: 'Bucharest Fashion Tips' is only one relevant example. The authors make use of different characters, specific to our country - the gipsy woman, the vagabond, the Romanian homeless man called 'boschetarul' and so on. Furthermore, in their manga, the authors use to inspire themselves Romanian media products such as the media franchise 'Mărgelatu' (Sava 2012, 37), 'Mihaela', 'Comisarul Moldovan' (Sava 2013, 37) or 'Toate pânzele sus', (in translation 'At full sail').

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In conclusion, Romanian manga can also serve as a medium to communicate uniquely Romanian experiences, but at the same time it is not free from the politics of representation, social status, or economics. Our research showed that manga is more of a general style of communication than a strict aesthetic or cultural dividing line. Romanian members of manga fandom engage in an informal pedagogy in order to communicate ideals of cultural production. This desire for instruction is an important part of manga fandom as critical consumers become critical producers. What the future holds for the Romanian manga? We can assume that very soon the



national market will answer the increasing demand for new Romanian manga. Furthermore, more and more manga authors will desire to perfect their drawing skills and to switch from amateur mode to professional mode. Thanks to the constant evolution of mass-media, we will witness soon the digitizing of Romanian manga and probably an increase in its export.

#### OTAKU COMMUNITY IN ROMANIA – AN INTERPRETATIVE COMMUNITY?

Otaku is considered to be the subculture and the community of Japanese fans attracted especially by anime and manga. The term has been used in the past decade to name all communities around the world focused on praising Japanese popular culture products such as anime and manga (Azuma 2009). In Romania, the emergence of a community of fans could be observed since the beginning of 2000. Early fans, who operated as individuals, were usually young people in their early and mid teens. Starting from a personal interest in one of the typical Japanese popular culture forms, often anime, these people later formed groups centered on Internet forums. Romanian fans see themselves as performing on a par with other communities around the world. We considered Romanian community Otaku to be an *interpretative community* because even though it is very different from the Japanese subculture with the same name, the Romanian community shares cultural experiences, preferences, identities and discourses with the Japanese one. Their sense of community is usually facilitated by mass media and information technology.

Romanian community has several main groups of reference that are located in the United States and Japan. In conclusion, Japanese popular culture has been deterritorialized. Even so, for Romanian fans, this popular culture remains resolutely 'Japanese'. One of the 'leaders' mentioned during the interview:

*'A Japanese product is 'Japanese' no matter where you see it or where you buy it. There is something so special and exotic about it that you just can't miss.... You have to be blind not to see it is Japanese.'*

After discovering Japanese popular culture initially through TV anime, the small group of mainly early and mid teenaged Romanian fans, who were also early adopters of the Internet and well versed in using their home computers, started to watch and download anime even before the turn of the twenty-first century. One of the leaders who organized various Japanese *popular culture events* mentioned during the interview:

*'The Internet was the only thing that opened the door to Japan and to its culture. It was too far away to go there directly and we are usually short on money. Even though not everyone in our group had Internet access, we are generous and share what we downloaded...'*

This was when search engines were in their pioneering stages, using the very early prototypes of chat clients and file-sharing programs. Early Romanian fans

often refer to those *'hard times'* when they had to use *'devious paths'* and *'clandestine connections'*, when they were exchanging floppy discs, just to get copies of anime series. An anonymous member of Otaku community added:

*'Nothing was ever too much to do if we finally got the anime episode we looked for... I remember that at one moment I had been searching for an episode for about three months... none of my friend had it but someone from a different town sent it to me...'*

First, they joined a growing virtual transnational community of Otaku, i.e. hardcore fans of anime, manga, 'Doujinshi', video games and paraphernalia, who are often criticized in Japan as being non-social geeks (Ishii 1990). However, in the Euro-American region and by extension also in Romania, the term Otaku has been adopted by local fans of contemporary Japanese popular culture as a rather cool denotation. Moreover, as we have been told by several of our interviewees, many of the Romanian fans do not deem themselves knowledgeable enough to be praised as *otaku*.

Meanwhile, the first Romanian speaking anime forums on the Internet, such as Anime Forum, Manga Zup and Manga forum, became attractive alternatives to international chat rooms and forums, which could be joined only by those with a good command of English. An anonymous Otaku member characterized this situation in this way:

*'There was finally a space of our own, where you could meet Romanian young people interested like you in Japan, in manga or anime. You didn't have to stay with a dictionary near you, just in case you didn't know some words... it was a true freedom... to speak in your language and to know your partner feels what you are saying... such a blessing...'*

As Japanese forums are naturally out of the way because of language barriers, the command of English seems to have always been a practical means to gain significant cultural capital, including for Romanian fans. One of the interviewee even said:

*'When I started using the forums, I felt like I was one of the luckiest guys on Earth. Until then, I had to make my way and to speak using English and I was never good at this subject. As for Japanese language, let's face it, you need 15 years to speak it fluently... I don't have that much time; I want to share my emotions and my love towards Japan now, at this moment, not in 15 years...'*

At the turn of the century, members of different Romanian forums started to meet regularly, in intimate social gatherings in outdoor parks or private homes. About these meetings, one Otaku member said:

*'It was indeed odd in the beginning... we were all shy but at the end of the day nobody wanted to go home. After that we started to meet regularly, we even had our own rituals, going to an Asian restaurant every two weeks. We all developed a very nice friendship...'*

The virtual communities centered on Japanese *popular culture*, similar with other virtual communities, provide their members with social network capital,

knowledge capital and communion. Internet forums are a heaven for many lonely souls, no doubt also because of the potential for constructing alternative identities (Baker 2001).

The disembodiment of participants in virtual communities is essential to the construction of alternative online identities.

Extension of virtual communities into real life, as in the case of fan communities, goes against the concept of Internet anonymity and is undermining the construction of alternative identities. However, fans (or at least most of them) do not seem to care. On the contrary, the virtually invented identities of fans flow seamlessly into real life.

An obvious example of this flow is how virtual pseudonyms are often kept in real life interactions. One of the leaders mentioned this fact during the interview, too:

*'It didn't matter how you looked, where you studied, what your parents did for a living and so on... You are you. Your contribution and your passion for Japan are all that matters. Everybody knows you by your nickname more than by your real name. You just say your nickname and everybody associates it with what you said on the forum, with your attitude and your mentality...'*

There was always a competitive edge among fans as well as acknowledged social hierarchy at play within the sub-communities and within the larger community. Even though, the larger community as a whole is arguably very inclusive. Anyone who shows an interest is welcome to join.

*'We are not fickle, we are actually friendly and we welcome everyone... you like anime, manga and Japan? Fine, come along! You don't like it? Nobody forces you to join us, mind your own business... as long as we don't hurt anybody, I don't see why we shouldn't express our feelings, our sympathies and our love for manga and anime. It doesn't mean we are kids, don't underestimate us... we usually watch mature anime and manga and after that we spend hours in talking about the story, the messages...'*

In merging virtual reality and media images with their daily reality, participating in virtual realities is no longer a liminal leisure pursuit for fans. Boundaries between realities blur. Fans' virtual identity becomes one facet of their identity, and fans' communion with other members of the community, which is based on a shared fascination with fictional worlds, becomes their favourite reality among multiple realities. The fan community becomes the most significant social and cultural affiliation for many of the fans—their preferred way of being. One of them said

*'Many of us like to think that we are our favourite character in real life too. I know it sounds so crazy but it is so fun!... you just forget about your problems, about feeling unwanted, ugly, meaningless. You become somebody important, loved and precious for so many people... It is a fantasy indeed, but such a sweet fantasy... It deserves being lived at least once, trust me!'*

We have selected two Otaku practices that deserve to be analyzed carefully: *Doujinshi* and *Cosplay* practice. Several leaders of the community noticed the fact

that the process of creating manga and the costuming, also known in academic discourse as Doujinshi and Cosplay practice, are fundamental for Otaku subculture. One of them said about Doujinshi practice:

*'We like to create. We like to redraw Japan in our perspective. We write the story of the manga how we see it and how we feel it. It is like we have the right to speak and express our mind. Nothing can stop us from expressing our feelings about Japan and creating a manga becomes the perfect solution for it.'*

As for Cosplay, known in a popular language as costuming and playing your favorite character, the same leader said:

*'It is like we are witnessing a rebirth, our rebirth. We come to live as someone else. At least for fifteen minutes, we leave behind our problems, our insecurities and our flaws. During the costuming and when we are on that stage, we are someone else. We play a character loved by so many people; we play someone almost perfect who is a winner no matter what...'*

One anonymous Otaku member remembers:

*'I was a pure amateur in cosplay back in high school, when the Gundam Seed series ravished my world. That's when my love for cosplay has begun. When I got to the college, I found a group of students who shared the same passion for cosplay. I got to know more people like me... At that time I was shy, lacking confidence. Soon I came to love to be on the stage or to play in front of other people.'*

Regarding Cosplay, an anonymous member of Otaku community added:

*'I felt in love instantly with Cosplay. It is pure magic... It is more than imitation; it is a form of baptism... each one of us is doing it differently. I am influenced in every day life by anime, manga or by Cosplay. I'm a follower of Gothic and Lolita fashion. My wardrobe is pretty much almost entirely composed of frilly, lacy, floofy or classical things. My favourite brand is Innocent World. After that it comes Angelic Pretty, for example. To me, Lolita fashion is normal, it became a style of life. That it is why sometimes I crossplay to really make a change.'*

Another anonymous member of the community commented the process of cosplaying in this way:

*'I am very careful when it comes to detail. I always try to do everything correctly. It doesn't matter how much I spend on materials, the result is the one that matters. I pay a lot of attention to details.'*

*I have learned that I shouldn't be afraid to try something else, to be different, to surprise everyone... On that stage, I am special no matter what... I am still learning a lot but I am ways better at this than I was in 2007, when I first tried Cosplay at ComicCon.'*

About the reaction of the audience, the same member said:

*'It's unbelievably awesome! I feel great, even if I don't always win! As an artist, it's wonderful to hear that people enjoy seeing my work, especially if it's a character they love just as much as I do. I can't begin to say how much the support means to me...'*

Another one said the public's reaction:

*'Personally I love it, its such a confidence boost for me. Of course I am worried every time that something could go wrong... But I try not to think too much at this... And it usually goes well. People are usually friendly and supportive...'*

Asked how would they describe their cosplay, the anonymous members gave different answers. One of them said:

*'My Cosplay has always been sexy, although in the future I want to move to more powerful, dark and mysterious characters. I was never attracted to the silly ones, I felt they were not representing me... however I have friends that feel that sexy is not their style... That is Ok, nobody is upset about this... Each one has his style and preferences. We just get along and respect each other's options. Everything turns out perfect in the end...'*

*I like powerful characters... maybe because sometimes I feel weak ... ha ha ha (laughs)...*

*I like feminine characters, I like to play characters that are beautiful and inspire me...*

*I have always been attracted by naïve characters... The silly ones are harder to play than you can imagine...'*

Finally, a curious fact is *the linguistic aptitudes* of these anonymous members. They all know at least twenty – thirty Japanese words, learned after watching anime or reading manga. They end up using those common Japanese terms in everyday life. Words like 'kawaii', (pretty), 'kakkoi' (cool), 'ohayou' (good morning), 'chibi' (very small), 'gyaru' (Japanese subculture, meaning 'girl'), 'aniparo' (anime parody), 'arigatou' (thank you), 'baka' (silly), 'mangaka' (manga author) and many more like these.

### **Doujinshi practice**

Doujinshi and Cosplay are among the most visible activities that anime fans engage in and have Western counterparts too (Ito 2012). However, they have not systematically been studied until nowadays in Romania. Previous research on media fans has often looked at fan fiction and fan videos in particular (Bacon-Smith 1992). Doujinshi has mostly been researched in the context of Japanese manga studies with some Anglo-American exceptions (McLelland 2005). Cosplay however is mentioned in some studies but rather as an illustration of fandom rather than an activity that could be analyzed further (Bacon-Smith 1992). Cosplay was also introduced as a performative phenomenon that solidifies fan identity, especially in terms of gender and sexuality (Lamerichs, 2011).

The term 'Doujinshi' is derived from 'doujin' (literally 'same person' which refers to one or several persons that have a common interest or goal) and *shi* (generally refers to 'magazine' or 'periodical'). Colloquially 'doujin' stands for the self-publication of fan works in mixed media (e.g., games, music, and comics) and underlines the community aspect that brings the fans together. 'Doujinshi' refers to

self-published as a medium which includes comics, light novels and art books (Lamerichs 2011). Often, Doujinshi is seen as fan-created manga that circulates within the Otaku community of Japanese popular culture, everywhere in the world. Doujinshi are often described as ‘amateur manga’ (Kinsella 1998); amateur is a concept that stems from the Latin ‘*amare*’ or ‘to love’.

Nowadays amateur implies the engagement in non-professional activities which partly resonates with Doujinshi. These comics are non-professional because they are often created as labor of love rather than for financial gain (Hellekson and Busse 2006). In Romania, the Romanian manga as a cultural hybrid is the best example of Doujinshi work. It is non-professional but at the same time the result of hard work combined with the love and the passion of the creator who is a merely anime fan and a member of Otaku community. The role of Doujinshi artists cannot be seen separately from the promotion of anime and manga altogether, which is a recent phenomenon in Romania. Anime conventions are a fairly new phenomenon in the country altogether, where Otaku Fest hosted its first edition in 2006, inspired by English anime conventions (Niels Viveen, pers. comm., June 20, 2012). In the past years there has been an increase in conventions that last for two days.

An anonymous member of Otaku community said about his own manga creations:

*‘I create manga because I just love it. No more words or explanations. If some people want to read what I do, it is even better. I don’t draw thinking about the profit. I rather draw manga than spend my time with useless things... it has become my refuge, my universe... sometimes I live the life I want through my characters. They all represent pieces of me.’*

With the interests in comics declining in Romania, Doujinshi artists helped to promote comics as a medium.

### **Cosplay practice**

The different local cultures of Doujinshi, also known as amateur manga authors, show their own practices and are adapted to the country’s national and cultural heritage. The uniqueness of the receiving culture is easier to observe when we analyze the Doujinshi phenomenon (Thorn 2004). Doujinshi flourishes within specific fan cultures of countries that may vary widely. Cosplay, however, tries to achieve a more international ethos, especially in terms of competitions. The term ‘cosplaying’ was coined in the eighties by the game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered the costuming practices of American fans on a visit to the United States (Bruno, 2002). In Japan, Cosplay has become very prominent since then (Okabe 2012).

In Western settings, there seems to be much overlap between Cosplay and other forms of dressing up such as (live-action) role-playing, but also digital dress up such as customizing one’s avatar (Winge 2006). In Cosplay, games and anime are embodied and transposed to new, physical settings. Players explicitly relate their own body and behaviour to fictional characters (McGray 2002).

Though fans wear their outfits in the hallway of conventions, they also use them in specific settings or events such as Cosplay competitions, fashion shows or photo shoots (Lamerichs 2011). The competitions, also known as masquerades, are often theatre skits that involve a performance in which the player really acts out the character. Fans enjoy having their picture taken in their outfits. Photographers in turn can specialize in photographing cosplayers as a creative hobby (Bruno 2002).

Though a cosplayer can perform the character in part, for instance by walking around with his or her attitude, the overall idea is a visual one. Cosplay is based on recognition, more than re-enactment as fans are not, and cannot be, in character at all times since the convention is also a social sphere in its own right (Murakami 2005). One of the members of Otaku community mentioned during the interview:

*'We become what and who we are playing on that stage, even if it is for a short period of time...Everything is what you can see and how the visual part influence the spectator, because on the stage the cosplayer doesn't say too much... in fact, the cosplayer may say a line or two but the costuming and how she or he moves makes the game...so, in the end, it is all about what you can see.'*

In the Romanian fan events, however, Cosplay has a fully different function than at Comiket, the Japanese most important annual event. The space is less restricted than in Japan as cosplayers are allowed to wear their outfits in the hallways and wear their outfits within the surrounding shopping malls and town areas. In Romania emphasizes photography more than other European countries with similar events but it is still largely a self-organized fan activity that is less structured than at Comiket.

Cosplay is more liberal in Western countries including Romania, where it manifests in the convention's hallways but it is also structured through competitions. These competitions take different shapes at local events. At Romanian conventions, the competition is composed of short theatre pieces or skits, which are often limited to three to five minutes when there are many contestants.

Romanian conventions frequently organize a separate fashion show whereas in many countries such performances are allowed to shortly go on stage and show their outfit during the competition itself.

#### JAPANESE 'POPULAR CULTURE' EVENTS IN ROMANIA

In Romania there are specific events that celebrate Japanese *popular culture*. Beside the three major events, there are also some regional events, in smaller cities. The most important events of this type are considered to be Otakufest, Nijikon and ComicCon. All of them are held in the capital of Romania, Bucharest. Visitors usually come from distant cities just to participate in this kind of events.

**OtakuFest** is considered to be national festival dedicated to anime and manga fans in Romania. The first edition was in 2006 and since then the numbers

of visitors have increased constantly; from 600 visitors to more than 3000 visitors, in 2013. The festival lasts for two days and different workshops take place in this time: Cosplay competitions, drawing manga classes, wig styling, making of a kimono, video games competitions and instructive classes about the history of anime and manga.

**ComicCon** debuted in 2013 and it is part of the East European Comic Con was created with the purpose of offering a much intimate experience for a limited number of visitors. It is dedicated at the same time to various types of comics but Japanese comics have their own special place in this event. This multigenre convention is dedicated to fans of comics, animations, video games, as well as TV series and movies in East Europe. At its first edition, ComicCon gathered a record number of 9000 visitors. Visitors usually attend and take part in various contests (Comics, drawing, make-up), video screenings, special sessions with movie and comics celebrities. Sometimes they also purchase products specific for this type of event. There are several well known contests held at Comic Con. Probably the most well known is the Cosplay costume contest where participants perform a short play while wearing the costume of a character from a comic, video game, animation or movie and imitate as well as they can imitate the character's gesture and behavior. Another one is a quiz contest for those who love anime, manga, TV series, comics and video games. An important part of the event is represented by the PC and console video game competitions, organized with the help of Electronic Sports League Romania (ESL).

*Nijikon* debuted in 2007 and it is considered to be one of the most important conventions for anime and manga fans. It targets a public with age between 12–30 years old. Although Japanese *popular culture* is the main theme, the event addresses to video games lovers and Asian music too. What is the most interesting thing to notice is the permanent competition that exists between the organizers of these major events. Every time, they all try to attract the highest number of visitors and plan various activities just to attract more people.

The love of some fans for Japanese *popular culture* has gone even far than participating in these events. For example, Alyanna Lu is considered to be the only Otaku singer in Romania. Her debut song is called 'Rainbow'. She adopted the visual style specific to manga and anime and now she looks exactly like a Japanese character. Her musical style is described as being 'heavily influenced by Japanese culture and a tribute expressing her love for anime'. The video clip of her first song reminds of Japanese virtual singer Hatsune Miku.

Although it is different from Romanian manga, the magazine *CosplayGen* is printed with the effort of Romanian fans that write every single article and the interviews with various Cosplay artists from all over the world. This magazine celebrates Cosplay as a form of art and promotes it in Eastern Europe.



### DIRECTIONS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

There are possible *directions of future research* that need to be examined carefully.

What we need to notice is that Romanian Otaku community *seems to aggregate in a solid and consistent subculture*. At the same time, the Romanian Manga authors start to create manga with *the purpose to sell abroad*, so now they take into consideration the international public, instead of the national public. They use in their creations English language instead of Romanian language. So they become more aware of the commercial and marketing side, the potential profit they could benefit from selling manga. This community developed particular social practices and different rituals that show cultural particularities. In this situation, it will also be more than interesting to conduct an analysis of karaoke in Romanian cultural context because the members of Otaku get frequently involved in this kind of practice. Fan appropriations and contributions to Japanese *popular culture* in Romania, also known as Doujinshi, represent another niche theme with great potential. Commonalities and differences in fandom-based creation and criticism between Japan and Romania are other possible future research directions. We also must take into account *the educative and learning potential of the Japanese popular culture*. Therefore, we cannot deny the significant use of *popular culture* in Japan studies and Japan language pedagogy. These products have influenced the Romanian consumers so much that they have changed their professional options and chose to study Japanese language at university instead of something else, for example.

Finally, we must be aware of the *connections existing between Japanese popular culture, also known as 'Cool Japan' and Korean popular culture, known as 'hallyu'*. Even though in Romania Korean popular culture is a couple of steps back, it promises to become a cultural rival for Nippon popular culture. There are undeniable resemblances between these two cultural models and the Romanian public seems to be attracted by Hallyu in the same manner. There are numerous cultural exchanges between these two models of popular culture and both have a significant impact over the Romanian public and the Romanian cultural space. As the world becomes more and more globalized, Romania is inevitably experiencing greater informational and cultural exchanges with the rest of the world, including Japan. Therefore, the impact of Japanese *popular culture* over the Romanian public is a complex and topical phenomenon. It is undeniable that Japanese media products have been transferred to Romania under various formats including anime, manga, television drama, film, computer games and music. Above all, anime and manga have become major cultural and visual pylons sustaining and representing the image of Japan within Romanian national space.

## CONCLUSIONS

Given the complete absence of research on Japanese popular culture in Romania, this study is therefore a pioneering one and its contents should be seen as preliminary findings and the conclusions as preliminary reflections. In conclusion, all the three objectives of the present research were attained: analyzing the emergence and the evolution of Japanese popular culture in Romania, proving the existence of a new cultural hybrid, the 'Romanian manga' and making a typology of the Otaku community in Romania.

The research also validated the hypotheses mentioned in the argument. First of all, we underlined the fact that the creators of Romanian manga are actually the consumers of Japanese popular culture products. We are witnessing a major change of role: from being passive consumers, they become active producers for their own manga stories. Second of all, we identified several main characteristics that we consider to be fundamental for a new cultural genre – the Romanian manga. This comic magazine is different from Japanese manga, from American or French comics or even from the old Romanian comics. Even though in Romanian manga the authors use a 'visual grammar' that is common to the one in Japanese manga, the features we identified show the Romanian cultural heritage of this new media genre. After using the magazine 'Comics' as a pattern for qualitative content analysis, we pointed out the following characteristics: the authors make in their manga stories continuous references to national celebrities or historical figures; they refer to and use constantly famous Romanian literature as a source of inspiration; Romanian fairytales, myths and legends often become a fertile source of inspiration for Romanian manga authors. Another consistent source for their stories are famous *Romanian media products* which they consumed before coming in contact with Japanese popular culture. The authors also make use of a language adapted to the problems and the realities of the Romanian society. At the same time, we can encounter in their manga various and multiple *Romanian specific expressions, proverbs, metaphors* and so on. The manga magazine we analyzed contained various columns adapted to the local space and to the most important topics and problems in Romanian society. Third of all, our research also focused on the historical evolution of Otaku community in Romania – the fans' community of Japanese popular culture products. After pointing out the most important moments in this community's history, we analyzed two cultural and social practices of these fans: Doujinshi and Cosplay practices developed in Romanian context.

In our opinion, this community can be named 'interpretative' because it develops the same two cultural practices (Doujinshi and Cosplay practices) as the Japanese subculture with the same name, Otaku. Although the members of these communities have never met in person, they behave and react in a similar way. They also like highly similar goods. However, on the one hand the present research has several limits: the absence of previous academic research regarding the

influence of Japanese popular culture over the Romanian youth has been a serious obstacle. We had to turn to foreign studies, usually American and mostly Japanese. The usage of qualitative research methods has brought us in the situation where it is impossible to generalize the findings and the results of the research. On the other hand, the present research has the advantage of being one of the first studies about Japanese popular culture and its impact in Romania. This study outlines the cultural circuit and the stages ran through the Japanese products in Romanian space. We also noticed the existence of a new cultural hybrid genre, the Romanian manga and we highlighted the fundamental characteristics of this genre.

Furthermore, establishing a historical evolution of the Otaku community is essential in understanding the behavior of Japan's Romanian fans. These fans devote their time and their energy to practicing 'Doujinshi' (creation of new manga) and Cosplay (costuming and playing the role of their favorite character).

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