



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

ザ・アイドル！ (The Aidoru!)

The Ardent Fans' Perspective

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

Japanese idols, or *aidoru*, are different from how the West defines idols. *Aidoru* are popular media personalities in Japan and the *aidoru* business has been strong for over 40 years. Female *aidoru* are usually in their teens, whilst male *aidoru* seem to have no age restriction, but both are pressured to stay “pure” by the media, and install good values. *Aidoru* do not only enjoy huge popularity in Japan, but they also have many fans outside of Japan, who are just as affected and influenced by them. The fans contribute amongst each other with fan related media and to the *aidoru*, by buying their merchandise. There are many fan communities online that are dedicated to particular groups.

The current thesis is based on the results of a questionnaire, aimed to explore foreign fans’ perceptions of *aidoru*. Fans can make or break the *aidoru*’s career; they depend equally on fans, for they could not exist for a long time without a trusty fan base that supports them. The focus of this research was the fan communities of *aidoru* in general, and how the international community perceives the *aidoru*.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Japanese Music Culture and <i>Aidoru</i> – An Introduction | 1 |
| Methodology | 3 |
| The Evolution of <i>Aidoru</i> Culture in Japan | 4 |
| <i>Aidoru</i> Groups – They Want Your Money, and Your Love! | 6 |
| The Male Groups – Johnny’s Entertainment | 6 |
| The Female Groups – Hello!Project and AKS..... | 8 |
| An <i>Aidoru</i> ’s Image and How it Affects Them | 11 |
| Fans and Fandom | 14 |
| The definition of <i>aidoru</i> , the reasons for their popularity and what cultural values and purposes they serve..... | 16 |
| The differences between male and female <i>aidoru</i> , and the possible reasons for it..... | 18 |
| Why the fans like the <i>aidoru</i> group they are fans of, and how long they have been fans..... | 19 |
| The influence <i>aidoru</i> have on fans’ lifestyles, and what keeps them as fans | 20 |
| Fans and <i>aidoru</i> merchandise: the estimated amounts fans have spent on their favorite <i>aidoru</i> . .. | 22 |
| Conclusion | 23 |
| Appendix | 25 |
| Bibliography | 26 |

Japanese Music Culture and *Aidoru* – An Introduction

Many people have the image of Japanese music being cute girls in skimpy outfits and feminine boys singing happy tunes in a world seemingly full of vibrant colours. However, it is not always like that; the Japanese music scene is as vast as in any other country, especially due to the fact that it is the second largest worldwide in terms of revenue. Although there are many different genres of Japanese music, there is one that seems to get the most attention, both in its home country and worldwide, and that is j-pop, or in other words, Japanese pop.

In the world of pop, Japan is a Neverland where the national obsession with youth has been rigorously commodified into a peculiar brand of entertainment: a luminous teenage daydream in which doe-eyed Lolitas and prettified Fauntleroy's frolic at the behest of omnipresent Svengali figures for the delectation of audiences. (Campion, 2005)

Japanese pop is fairly innocent compared to Western pop: having carefree and childlike sensibility to it. (Brasor, Tsubuku, 1997:64) The cute girls and boys singing and dancing are most likely a part of what is called an "idol group". Many might not know exactly what being an idol in Japan entails. Webster's dictionary has a couple of definitions of the word "idol", one being a representation or a symbol of an object of worship and another being an object of extreme devotion. (Merriam-Webster, 2013)

Japanese people tends to take foreign words, especially from English, and interpret them differently, assimilating them into the Japanese language whilst changing their nuances and meanings. These words are called *wasei eigo* (和製英語). The definition for "*aidoru* (idol)" in Japan, and the one that will be used for the purposes of this thesis, is men and women in the entertainment industry who are "bred" to entertain people: some are trained before their debut and some are trained by the experiences they get after they debut. They are extremely popular amongst many kinds of people, and to those who take it to the extreme; they are an object of complete worship and/or devotion. Thus the word "*aidoru*" is used in this essay as a noun describing a person or a group of people who are influential and bring their fans joy. Another example of *wasei eigo* in the entertainment industry is, for example, the word "*tarento* (talent)," which refers to media personalities that appear regularly on television: these *tarento* range from comedic one-hit wonders, *owarai tarento* or comedians, and even foreign-born *tarento*. More examples of words are "*sarariiman* (salaryman)" which is a typical blue-collar worker and even "*amerikandoggu* (American dog)" meaning "corn dog."¹ (Zoller, 2011)

¹ Other interesting *wasei eigo* terms include "*kanningu* (cunning)" meaning "cheating," "*baikingu* (viking)" meaning "all-you-can-eat buffet," "*onriiwan* (only one)" meaning "unique" and "*donmai* (don't mind)" or "don't worry about it."

Aidoru are not restricted to just one field of the entertainment industry.² Instead, they, like the Hollywood idols of old, possess a variety of talents: they sing, dance, act, star as guests in shows, appear in magazines, and so on. Depending on companies, *aidoru* are not required to know how to sing, or dance, but what seems to be most required is that they possess an interesting personality. They can therefore be referred to as *tarento*, because of all the things they can do. *Aidoru* are indeed everywhere, some more famous than others, and they are not hard to miss. Anyone could be an *aidoru*, but not everyone *is* one. Some might wonder why people are attracted to them, and why they are such a big part of their fans' lives. *Aidoru* in Japan, especially *aidoru* groups, do make a big impact on the economy through their sales. The 2012 yearly ranking compiled by the Oricon³ chart, 7 out of 10 spots in the top of the list were occupied by *aidoru* groups, who had earned billions of yen in revenue that year. (Oricon, 2013)

Whilst the image of Japanese *aidoru* groups are happy, all smiles and catchy pop songs and fun personas, they go through many years of rigorous training and molding in order to come out as the influential people that many look up to in various ways. It therefore begs the question of what makes them so popular, why and just how they influence and affect their fans' lives. *Aidoru* have tremendous power over their fans and the fandom: Many fans tend to buy all of their goods, the things they advertise, and even the food their *aidoru* have eaten recently.⁴

For many fans, *aidoru* provide a form of escapism from the real world. The existence of *aidoru* is essential, to some degree: many fans have expressed that *aidoru* bring them fun and happiness, an escape from reality, as well as inspire and influence many people to be someone and/or do something great. This will be further discussed in the survey results. The foreign fan base brought about interesting and thorough opinions on the subject of Japanese *aidoru* and their world. Unlike Japanese fans, foreign fans are usually introduced to *aidoru* much later on in their lifetimes. Foreign fans have had to discover on their own what a Japanese *aidoru* is, because the concept of an 'idol' is very different between cultures. Thus, *aidoru* have managed to cross language-and culture barriers and gained fans in many countries outside of Japan. Despite not being Japanese, it is interesting to see that many foreign fans find that there are cultural values to *aidoru*, and that they are affected and influenced just as much as Japanese fans are by them.

² Idols are put out as clean slates to be molded by the fans' expectations, and they learn how to grasp at the industry. These skills are not demanded, but they are learned. It's more about personality than looks in Japan.

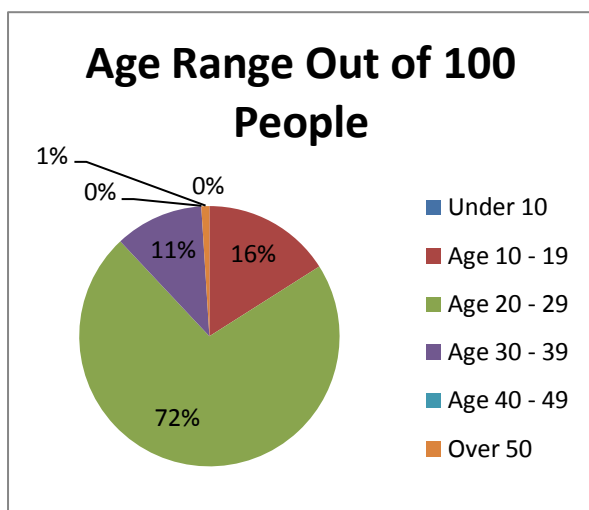
³ Oricon ("Original Confidence") is the Japanese equivalent of the Billboard music chart in the US. It gathers information about artist's sales in many genres, including music, DVDs and albums.

⁴ Satoshi Ohno of Arashi, ate a crêpe during one of Arashi's variety shows "Arashi ni Shiyagare" [嵐にしやがれ] (which could be translated to something akin to "Have Arashi do it!"). Shortly after the broadcast date [01.01.2013], the crêpe he ordered (with apples, cinnamon and fresh cream) ranked in 1st in the shop where he bought it. [Seen here: <http://sgkaylee.tumblr.com/post/40763450652/>]

Methodology

In order to further study and learn about fans' thoughts about their *aidoru* and the image they portray, I conducted two surveys: one to (majorly) Arashi/Johnny's fans, and another to AKB48/Hello!Project fans. These surveys were posted to communities where the members are mostly foreign (in other words, non-Japanese residents). However, I got less than 12 responses for the survey posted for the AKB48 fandom, which would not give a good overview for this survey. The survey posted for the Arashi fandom made up for it, giving me enough responses to elaborate on the results.

For the perspective of male group fans, which consists of mostly foreign fans, I posted my survey in a locked *LiveJournal.com* community, called Arashi-On, which caters mainly to fans of Arashi outside of Japan. This survey was created using the website *www.surveymonkey.com*. I posted the link to my survey on the 18th of January, and over the course of a weekend, it managed to gather over 100 responses from enthusiastic fans that were willing to help my cause. Since this author is a part of the Arashi fandom as well, most foreign fans seem to be relatively young and seem to be divided between being still in school, unemployed or taking part of the working community. The survey asked the foreign fans questions including how much their favorite *aidoru* affected their lifestyle, the reasons for their popularity, whether or not they hold cultural values, the definition of an *aidoru* and several other questions. Having responded well to the questions given to them, the fans' results to the survey will be revealed later on in this essay.⁵ Most questions were mandatory, but there were a couple of optional ones. As a fan for 4 years of an *aidoru* group, there was a personal interest in knowing what other fans' opinions were on Japanese *aidoru* culture. There is a common misconception that the grand majority of *aidoru* fans consist of pre-teen girls, just like with Western artists, such as Justin Bieber. Interestingly, out of the 100 people questioned, the age distribution of *aidoru* fans shows differently: most fans are not in their teens, but young adults or older.



Out of the 100 people who participated in this survey, 72 were in between 20 and 29 years of age. 16 were between 10 – 19 years of age, 11 people were between 30 – 39 and one respondent was over 50. This shows the age range of the foreign fans of Arashi who participated: most of them are young adults, and based on previous observations, most foreign fans seem to be either in college studying, or working citizens. There are reasons to believe that there are fans that

⁵ Take note that not all fans who answered the survey on Arashi-On are Arashi fans. Those fans were kind enough to let me know that although they like Arashi, they were bigger fans of other Johnny's groups, or Korean *aidoru* groups.

are both younger and older than the age range presented in this survey; however, computer access might be limited for them, thus skewing the results. Furthermore, many fans may not be familiar with the website the survey was linked to, and thus not able to answer the survey.

The Evolution of *Aidoru* Culture in Japan

The history of *aidoru* culture in Japan is not long; it was only around the 1950s that *aidoru* began to emerge onto the music and entertainment scene. *Aidoru* became more and more popular, and nowadays, although the golden era of *aidoru* has passed, they are practically everywhere. An *aidoru*'s job is not restricted to just one thing: they, amongst others, promote themselves on shows, sing, dance, act and advertise products.

In an article Japan Times published in 2009, the veteran entertainment reporter Masaru Nashimoto expressed in an interview his opinion that an *aidoru* was someone young and that had a following so frenzied that it had become something liking to a social phenomenon. (Matsutani, 2009) Until the 1960's, popular music was mostly aimed at adults, but with the influence of foreign groups such as the Beatles, Japanese youth culture began to change and form into something akin to how it is today around the world. Another factor was that with the help of singing contests, *aidoru* had begun appearing on the music scene. (Brasor, Tsubuku, 1997:59)

Ever since the "kawaii" (or cute) culture became popular in Japan, it has influenced the *aidoru* market, especially the women, since it celebrates innocent, sweet, vulnerable behavior and cute physical appearances. (Kinsella, 1995:220) Being "cute" is a big product in Japan, and most *aidoru* seek to have this quality in order to get ahead in the business.⁶ Although there were a couple of *aidoru* and *aidoru* groups in the 50's and 60's, they did not really become popular until the 70s. As the author of "*Aidoru Kogaku*" (or "Idol Engineering" in English) phrased it for Japan Times:

Until the 1960s, the songs came first, and singers who were suited to the songs were mostly used [...] But since 1971, when Saori Minami and Mari Amachi made their debuts, priority has been given to the personalities of idols. (Hidetsugu, 2006)

The 1980s, especially the first half, were considered the golden age for female *aidoru* (Hidetsugu, 2006), with *aidoru* such as Seiko Matsuda, who has been called the "Eternal *aidoru*" by the Japanese media, and Momoe Yamaguchi. The *aidoru* company Johnny and Associates⁷ started debuting male groups as well, that became very popular. At the same time, *aidoru* such as Matsuda and Yamaguchi, as well as Shounentai and Hikaru Genji to name a few, gained a lot of following in foreign countries such as Singapore. (Ng, 2003:2-3)

⁶ Cute characters are used in books, manuals, on trains and buses, and even on flyers during road constructions, as a polite way of conveying information. (Avella, 2004:211)

⁷ Also known as "Johnny's Jimusho" (ジャニーズ事務所) or "Johnny's Entertainment."

In fact, East Asia was known to 'share' TV programs and music with each other, and in the early 90s it was Japanese J-pop (*aidoru*) and dramas that were most popular. (Wee, 2012:204) Reporter Nashimoto mentions in an interview with Japan Times, how during the golden years, *aidoru* became the money-makers and broadcasters had singing programs on prime time television every night that tallied in high viewer ratings, and in his own words he said:

TV is about the only medium idols were born in, and talent agencies sought to maximize their TV appearances as much as possible. Broadcasters also wanted their shows stocked with idols to boost ratings. (Matsutani, 2009)

This still remains true in today's modern world. Many broadcasters continually try to raise their viewer ratings by filling shows and television dramas⁸ with *aidoru*; some enjoying more success than others. The *aidoru* system peaked in the 80s and started to go downwards in the 90s, precisely coinciding with the burst of Japan's bubble economy. (Iwabuchi, 2002:555) Although the system is not like it was during the 80s, *aidoru* are still famous and, depending on their image, well-respected. They use television as a way of promoting themselves, their groups (if they happen to be in one), their music and their personalities, and it is through that medium that many gain more fans. Therefore, it may be better to call them '*tarento*' rather than *aidoru*, because they do not focus on just singing or performing. (Darling-Wolf, 2004)

Aidoru seem to the media consumer as people who you can feel a close proximity to, because not all *aidoru* are good singers, technically, but their charisma is what makes them sell. (Painter, 1996) The management company, or *jimusho*, follows its *aidoru* closely, and makes sure every wheel is turning:

The *jimusho* have a wide spectrum of responsibilities: scouting new performers/models; training them in singing, dancing, and other skills; scheduling performers' daily activities; booking television appearances; negotiating contracts with record labels and other media institutions; organizing fan clubs; doing public relations work to enhance the performers' image; and coordinating live performances and concert tours. (Marx, 2012:38)

Despite the *aidoru* system having peaked around 1980, *aidoru* are still popular in Japan, and *aidoru* promotion continues to grow. *Aidoru* are busy people, with seemingly endless amount of work scheduled for them. One of the bigger promoters of *aidoru* is Johnny's entertainment: an *aidoru* agency which handles mostly male groups, and has produced many groups and singers that rake in the big dough.

⁸ Television dramas or ドラマ are broadcasted daily and are a big part of Japanese television. There are many varieties of series, from horror to romance. Drama is the Japanese equivalent of shows such as 24, Grey's Anatomy, Desperate Housewives, and others. Drama episodes are usually shot a couple of weeks before each air date, so for fans of idols, there are a lot of opportunities to look for their favorites.

***Aidoru* Groups – They Want Your Money, and Your Love!**

Aidoru have more “content” to their collected image: that they (the consumer) can be more familiar with *aidoru* than characters. To *aidoru* this quality is a product they are selling to their consumers. Put aside whether or not that is the product that the consumer sees, but at least, from that the story of how *aidoru* are born and raised can be thought of.⁹ (Sakai, 2003:30)

This chapter explains one of the most popular types of *aidoru*: a whole group of them! *Aidoru* groups have the advantage over individual *aidoru* that there can be many types of personalities in one group capable of luring in new fans. Groups are produced by companies, and most are trained in dancing and singing before their debut. Groups can be composed of female groups and male groups, and their fan base usually depends on which gender the group is. An *aidoru*’s image is also very important for the group’s success and longevity, for it could make or break the group.

The Male Groups – Johnny’s Entertainment

You cannot escape the handsome faces of Johnny’s *aidoru* in commercials, on billboards, on TV: they are practically everywhere. The secret behind their success is Johnny’s management and the promotion the groups are given under Johnny, grossing in huge amounts of money. Through good marketing and the *aidoru*’s charisma and personalities, they sell well and gain a lot of popularity, especially with women.

Male *aidoru*, just like female *aidoru*, are expected to be good looking, and a lot of their popularity rests on their looks as well as their personalities. Yaiko Shimizu, who manages the website Asian Pop Shock, said in an interview with CNN blogger Colette Bennet, that she thinks a lot of the appeal of the ‘cuteness’ that a male *aidoru* possesses has to do with their implied sensitive nature and openness. She also said: “While a cute idol can be masculine [...] he’s not someone who’s likely to be perceived as threatening. It makes these idols safe, comfortable love objects, particularly since they’re generally considered out of reach.” (Bennett, 2012)

The most famous male *aidoru* group agency in Japan is Johnny’s Entertainment, run by a man named Hiroasu “Johnny” Kitagawa. It is commonly perceived that Johnny’s Entertainment is one of Japan’s most powerful talent agencies, due to its talents grossing huge sums of money (Brasor, 2007). One of Johnny’s most known and famous group is SMAP (short for “Sports Music Assemble People”) who debuted in 1991. Due to SMAP’s popularity, Johnny’s Entertainment earned over 3 billion yen in 1995 alone. (“SMAP,” 2013) Recently,

⁹Original text: “実は、アイドルは同じイメージ財の一方であるキャラクター（マンガやアニメの）との対比において、よりコンテンツ性に馴染む性質を持っている。アイドルには、それが商品であるアイドルとして消費者の見える位置にあるかどうかは別にして、少なくともアイドルであるその人が、生まれ、育ち、アイドルになったという物語は考えられる。”

Johnny's Entertainment's top moneymaker has been Arashi, a group that debuted in 1999 and who have gotten more popular over the years. In 2010, all six singles that Arashi released that year, were in the top 10 list of the Oricon chart (Tokyograph, 2010), and their total music DVD sales in early 2011 exceeded over 4 million copies which was a record for total sales of an artist. (Oricon, 2011a)

The company began when Johnny first assembled a group of friends for a baseball team, but after he and his friends went to see *West Side Story*, they also wanted to sing and dance and that was how Johnny's first group started in the 1960s. ("JOHNNY'S WORLD," 2013) This was the start of Johnny's successful company, which would grow to be the way it is today.

"If you don't please the audience, the whole thing is totally pointless." These were the words of Johnny Kitagawa in his first ever televised interview with NHK World. This was his response to being asked if he thought that entertainment was done for the audience. He is not looking to please himself with the success of his *aidoru*, but to please the fans, regardless to age and gender, and make them want more and more. Shinichiro Kaneda, Nikkei business deputy editor, said this about Johnny's Entertainment's way of business:

It's a model that revolutionized the industry. Basically, once one group succeeds, you look for more boys who are good at dancing. Then you make them backing dancers to the first band. Gradually, the fans recognize those kids in the background. You find out what the fans think about those boys, and you make the fans hungry to see more of them. (JOHNNY's World, 2013)

As Kaneda puts it, this method of introducing the newer boys to the fans gives Johnny exceptionally good odds of debuting groups with great sales and popularity.

Johnny's *aidoru* usually start their journey into showbiz by becoming so-called "Johnny's juniors." Most juniors are from 10 to 18 years old, but there are a couple of older juniors as well as younger ones. All of them start by sending in a resume to Johnny's Jimusho, and wait for a call or a letter back telling them when to meet up for auditions. For some, they only had to wait a week to get one but for others it could take months. Once they get a call back, they are told when and where to show up for auditions. During these auditions, the boys have to perform a dance routine and should they do well, they will become juniors. It is then that the boys will have to juggle busy work life singing, dancing and acting as juniors with both school and private life. (Nagaike, 2012:97) Juniors dance behind the debuted Johnny's groups during their concerts, and many aspire to be what their seniors have become. From time to time, the juniors had their own TV shows where they could appeal to the audience with their personalities. One of these shows was "It's 8 o'clock, J." [8時だ J], which was launched in 1998 and marked the peak of the Johnny's junior boom, according to many. (Eirween555, 2011)

Some juniors get to debut early on, some later, and some have not even debuted at all yet despite becoming increasingly popular¹⁰. The boys are then selected to become a part of a group; it could take months or even years to debut. By debuting, the group has a better chance to succeed in the market, and the more popular the group becomes, the more screen time they get.¹¹

So what is an *aidoru*'s view on Johnny's Agency itself? Kazunari Ninomiya of the group Arashi had this to say to the interviewer for the documentary show Jounetsu Tairiku: "It's like a general information center. They say things like 'this is next!' and we go 'Alright!'"¹² He further explains how the *aidoru* generally do not complain about this setup, and how *aidoru* have come to understand their fans and what their fans want from them. (Jounetsu Tairiku, 2006)

The charm of *aidoru* from companies such as Johnny's Entertainment, is that people are usually exposed to them whilst they are young, and their fans get to watch them grow up. Through this constant exposure to their *aidoru*, they grow to feel closer to them, as if they were friends. When asked what would happen to the Johnny's family after he was gone, Johnny answered that the only thing that he does is to keep eye on things, and that he is positive the young talent in his company will keep it going strong in the future. (JOHNNY'S World, 2013) However, male groups are not the only ones that are popular; in fact there are a lot of female groups that have gotten big as well.

The Female Groups – Hello!Project and AKS

Female *aidoru* are promoted just as fiercely as male *aidoru*, yet in a different way: they are mostly portrayed as cute and/or sexy. Although men are seemingly the bigger fan base for female *aidoru*, these female groups have the advantage of being equally approachable by fans of all sexes. Groups such as AKB48¹³ and its other fractions have gained tremendous popularity since their debut, and AKB48 is currently Japan's overall top grossing *aidoru* group.

There have been many popular female *aidoru* groups in recent years, including Morning Musume, Idoling!!!, Momoiro Clover Z and the 48 units (including AKB48 and SND48). Overall, there have been more female groups than male. In the earlier year of Japanese pop history, *aidoru* duos and trios such as Pink Lady and The Candies were hugely popular. Girl groups, just like their male counterparts, have to hide their personal lives as much as they can. Their fans are usually of both genders, being attracted to their ideal image of cute, strong girls.

¹⁰ A good example of this is Toma Ikuta, a Johnny's junior who still has not debuted officially. He works diligently as an actor and has generated a lot of fans through his career path, making him quite famous in Japan.

¹¹ For additional information on Johnny's Juniors I recommend the documentary "The Truth of Johnny's Juniors" or ジャニーニーズJr.の真実 (*Johnny's Jr. No Shinjitsu*), found here: [http://www.d-addicts.com/forum/viewtopic_119617.htm]

¹² "総合案内所みたいで、「これこれ」と言ってきてみたいの、「はい」みたいな"

¹³ AKB48 stands for "Akihabara 48"; the place where they debuted and the number of members in the group, although currently they are more than what the name hints.

One of Japan's biggest girl group companies in the early 2000s was Hello! Project. Despite still being active and earning good sums of money, its talents are not as popular today as they were around the year 2000.¹⁴ Hello! Project is not one group; it is a name for many *aidoru* artists and groups that are managed by UFP (Up-Front Promotion Co., Ltd.), such as Berryz Koubou, Buono!, °C-ute, S/mileage and their most popular group, Morning Musume¹⁵. Most of the groups are produced by the well-known singer and producer Tsunku¹⁶.

The institution manages Morning Musume began in 1997 during the auditions for a female singer for Tsunku's band. (Poole, 2009) Five runner ups from his auditions were challenged by him to sell 50 copies of their single within five days, and when they succeeded, Tsunku gave them a deal as their producer for a proper debut. It was also then, when Tsunku incorporated 3 more girls into the group, that the generation/graduation part of the group saw light. In other words, when some girls are for example, deemed not fitting the group's image anymore (due to age), they 'graduate' from the group, and newer, fresher faces are often included in the new line-up.

Morning Musume's seventh single, LOVE Machine, was the group's first million seller and brought the group to fame. As the group became popular, Morning Musume became the fashion icon of young girls and the clothing store that supplied the group their wardrobe became a leading brand: the reason for Morning Musume's fame and fashion influence is due to the fact that the group is composed of 'ordinary' girls who auditioned for it, and therefore proving that any typical Japanese girl can become famous. (Sato, 2005)

Ai Takahashi, who joined the group's fifth generation and was the 'band leader' during the interview with Japan Press in 2009, had this to say about joining the group, and the training:

Since I was little I've loved singing in front of people. So, when I saw Morning Musume, I wanted to join them. [...] There was an audition at a training camp for three days and two nights. We got a new song, new dance steps and a new script and had to remember them all. There were nine girls for the final screening, out of 25,000 applicants. (Poole, 2009)

Takahashi graduated the group in 2011, at the age of 25, relatively late for an *aidoru* in her group. (Oricon, 2011b)

AKB48 is currently Japan's, and the world's, largest pop group. (Guinness World Records, 2010) The group was created by veteran pop producer Yasushi Akimoto.¹⁷ He

¹⁴ This can be easily proven by looking at the Oricon chart, and its biggest group's total year sales count: http://helloproject.wikia.com/wiki/Morning_Musume#Total_Sales_Count

¹⁵ Or „Morning Daughter/Girl“ in English. The name is to reflect their energy and likeability. ("プロフィール," 2013)

¹⁶ つんく, often stylized as つんく♂. His real name is Mitsuo Terada.

¹⁷ Akimoto's many accomplishments include making a movie with Yoko Ono and writing Shibari Misora's last hit. (Maxwell, and Joyce)

continues to produce the group, from their debut in 2005 to this day. Based in Akihabara¹⁸, it has been active for a long time, but they just recently¹⁹ got their major breakthrough, and started selling more than 1 million copies of their singles. Despite the number '48' in their name, AKB48 has around 87 members today, and over 150 members overall.²⁰ Akimoto described AKB48 in the following words:

In America, performers are chosen through strict auditions of thousands of people, and those with the most talent have to go through difficult lessons and coaching before they are 'complete' [...] AKB48 girls are 'unfinished.' In other words, they're still not very good at singing or dancing. The fans are supporting the girls and cheering them on as they gradually get better – as they become the finished article – that's what AKB48 is all about. (Maxwell and Joyce, 2011)

Although AKB48 has a lot of female fans, you could say that they seem to cater towards the males in some aspects. It is particularly obvious if you take some of their more recent songs, like Heavy Rotation and Ponytail to Shuushuu, into consideration. In both videos, the girls dance around in either underwear or bikinis, and do many various forms of fan service. However, Akimoto wanted to target people that liked *aidoru*, and would find watching young girls singing and dancing on stage in Akihabara fun and interesting. (Maxwell, 2011) When three members of AKB48 endorsed a so-called 'heart bra' for the lingerie shop Peach John, the store was reportedly flooded by male fans buying enough underwear to get their hands on the special edition poster with the girls. (Smith, 11) Another controversial endorsement was the commercial for the candy Puccho. The commercial showed members from AKB48 sharing a piece of candy between them, exchanging it from one to another by using their mouths.

AKB48's merchandise is as large as their group: with three different gift shops related to them (two in Akihabara and one in Harajuku), as well as cafés. (Smith, 2011) Their marketing strategy is just as clever: there are handshake events from time to time, and the so-called "elections." When handshake events are held, fans are given the opportunity to line up to shake hands with their favorite members, but you are not given a lot of time to speak to them. During the "elections," fans that have bought CDs for balloting, get the opportunity to vote for the members they wish to have as the lead for the group's next single; there have been instances where die-hard fans have bought 50 CDs and over just to get equal amount of votes. (Michel, 2012) The elections are immensely popular, watched by millions of people on TV and broadcasters spend weeks trailing votes, and there is a three hour live broadcast on the final night. (McCurry, 2012) In an interview with the Asahi Shimbun's Asia & Japan Watch, an expert of social media and critic Satoshi Hamano had this to say about their marketing strategy:

¹⁸ Tokyo's "Electrical Goods" town. You can find maid cafés, cartoons, comics, but most of all electric goods, in one spot.

¹⁹ Their popularity boom begun around 2010 to 2011.

²⁰ If you count the members of AKB48, and the members of their spin-off groups SDN48, SKE48 and NMB48 together.

I think AKB48 is a forerunner model of “cognitive capitalism,” which markets information and other metaphysical services that appeal to people’s feelings and emotions, in the postindustrial economy. [...] As many as 100,000 people line up just to shake hands with a girl for 10 seconds and leave the booths with ecstatic looks on their faces. (Matsubata, 2013)

Hamano describes this phenomenon as something similar a religion, or a cult like the Aum Shinrikyo.²¹ He continues by saying how young Japanese have in the past few decades developed an attitude of immersing themselves into trivial or nonsense objects, because many cannot stick to a transcendent absolute being or value: “For Aum followers, it was their guru, Shoko Asahara, and for AKB48 fans, they are the young girls who are physically, economically and politically very powerless.” (Matsubata, 2013)

Through elaborate marketing AKB48, and other sister groups and unrelated groups, have gained their popularity. AKB48 manages to generate a lot of income through their concerts, events and advertisements, a feat no *aidoru*, male or female, would be able to make if it were not for their image. *Aidoru* rely heavily on their image, and it is no easy feat for them to stay clear from ‘scandalous’ activities. One of the major issues *aidoru* face is how their image is portrayed and influenced by the media. This is very similar to the modern day thinking of “looks are everything,” and it has only drawn to light how much they are portrayed by their image for all the wrong reasons. One step deemed wrong by the media and their fans could break an *aidoru*’s life.²²

An *Aidoru*’s Image and How it Affects Them

For *aidoru*, their image means their life and a tainted image can bring about loss of fans and jobs, for individual members of a group and even the group itself. Scandals are a deadly force against *aidoru*, and could easily ruin their image. One of the most important rules of *aidoru* agencies is for their *aidoru* to hide their relationships from the public eye, so that fans have an easier time attaching themselves to their favorite member. Good image on the other hand, enables *aidoru* to further expand their influence and gain a good fan base.

AKB48 members, just like Johnny’s *aidoru*, are prohibited from having romantic relations publically. Several members were pushed to ‘graduate’ or resign from the group if photos of them were released: in 2012, popular member Yuka Masuda announced her resignation after photos of her suggested she had stayed overnight at a male celebrity’s house, to which she confessed to. (Masuda, 2012) Professor Hifumi Okunuki provides an interesting angle on the subject of *aidoru* and dating, especially regarding AKB48 and its sister groups: she feels that managers and producers have no right to deprive the girls the opportunity of experiencing ups and downs of relationships, despite male fans feeling

²¹ The Aum Shinrikyo doomsday/terrorist cult was responsible for the Tokyo sarin gas attacks in 1995.

²² Many fans, and gossip magazines, voice complaints if an *aidoru* seemed to have gained or lost weight, or if a male *aidoru* grew a beard.

'betrayed' or 'lied to' by AKB members who are dating, and saying that their value as an *aidoru* lessens because they are not 'selling the fantasy' to their fans. (Okunuki, 2013) Despite this, there are a lot of people for the ban. One AKB48 member, Yuki Kashiwagi, feels the relationship ban to be essential, and that she always thought it was natural that there was one: "If there was love in the mix, the feelings of support that the fans have might fade." (Mantan Web, 2013)

The punishments in some cases do go further than one might think: just recently, Minami Minegishi, one of the front members, was reduced to a trainee level after being caught spending the night with a man. (Ozawa, 2013) As a show of her regret, she shaved off her hair and declared her feelings of remorse on AKB48's channel on a video uploaded on the 31st of January. After it had been watched over 3 million times, it was taken down a couple of days later (on 2nd of February) and a notice uploaded in its stead. (AKB48, 2013) Although the notice states that the video was taken down due to fans sending in requests for it to be done, some fans speculate if the reason might have been the international attention it had gained. (BBC news, 2013)

In idol performances, idols are typically presented to the public as "pure" personalities [...] the pure image of idols often accompanies a consecrating catchphrase "Kiyoku, *tadashiku*, *utsushiku*!" or "Pure, honest, and beautiful," and for idol fans especially this means that idols are distant from scandalous romances and acts that are considered immoral [...] (Aoyagi, 33)

Yet, as Aoyagi portrays, *aidoru* become the subject of scandals often, making this an aspect of style rather than essential quality. (33) *Aidoru* are not just *aidoru* in the name: *aidoru* with a generally all-around good image are given huge opportunities to promote themselves, and gain fans. Arashi, for example, was given the right in 2010 to become the country's tourist navigators and the "face of Japan." (47NEWS, 2010) This means that Arashi promoted Japan to travelers, most noticeably in other Asian countries, but a long commercial featuring them was also shown in over 100 countries. (Momoedgewood, 2011) Should *aidoru* have the right kind of appeal, they could promote and advertise almost anything with good results, and many groups are made with an ideal image or appeal in mind.

Through testing and molding, studios designed star personalities; through vehicles, publicity, promoting, public appearances, gossip, fan clubs, and photography, they built and disseminated the personalities; through press agents, publicity departments, and contracts, they controlled the image. (Redmond, 144)

Just like the American film industry in the early 20th century, *aidoru* in Japan are 'manufactured' in the same way: their image is tightly controlled, and any small gossip or scandal could ruin an *aidoru*'s image and popularity. The images of Johnny's *aidoru* are so tightly controlled that even pictures of them on their website were not allowed until recently when the company became a bit more lenient. Until then, they usually had drawn

portraits of the *aidoru* on the Johnny's website or the webpage for the current drama an *aidoru* was starring in.

Former member of NEWS²³, Takahiro Moriuchi, was rumored amongst fans to have quit because he had been caught dating, but the official news given where that he quit because of school. (Daily Sports, 2007) Moriuchi is now known under the name Taka, and as the singer of ONE OK ROCK, a popular rock group. Members Uchi Hiroki and Hironori Kusano of NEWS were suspended from the group in 2006 indefinitely for being caught drinking whilst underage, reducing their group from 8 members to 6.²⁴ (Sponichi Annex, 2006a) *Aidoru* group Kanjani8 was also affected by having Uchi as a member, in a way that their scheduled television drama for that year had been postponed due to him breaking the law. (Sponichi Annex, 2006b)

Aidoru are to keep their love lives from the public's eyes as much as possible, in order to appeal more to their female fans. (Bennett, 2012) Currently, there are not many Johnny's *aidoru* that are married, and those who are were given special permission by the agency, but there is one *aidoru* that is different: Jin Akanishi. Akanishi is a former member of KAT-TUN who had withdrawn from the group, married model Meisa Kuroki in 2012 and he did not tell his agency, or Johnny himself, until after they had tied the knot. This resulted in Akanishi's tour around Japan being cancelled by the agency, and Akanishi himself having to take financial responsibility for that action. (Yomiuri/Nikkan Sports, 2012)

In 2006, Morning Musume member Ai Kago was caught smoking underage²⁵ and her company placed her on hiatus from the group for months. She was caught again smoking a year later, just as she was to return back from her hiatus, and was thus exiled from the world of show business. (Asahi, 2007)

There was a scandal over an inappropriate photo of Tomomi Kasai from AKB48 earlier this year. The photo showed Tomomi Kasai's breasts being covered from behind by a young boy. The photo sent the media in frenzy, and there were news of readers feeling unpleasant just looking at it. (Cyzo, 2013) The magazine which featured it had to be pulled back from the stands so that the offensive photo could be removed. The staff of Young Magazine posted a notification to their readers on their website, apologizing for cancelling orders for that issue and thanking them for their understanding. (Kodansha, 2013)

An *aidoru*'s image is their life. It controls every aspect of their life, and job. With good image, they gain good credibility and more fans. Good image also gives them good influence over their fans, which are essential for *aidoru* to survive. They are ultimately role models to their fans, and many fans have dedicated their lives to their *aidoru*.

²³ A Johnny's idol group, formed in 2003.

²⁴ Both boys were at the age of 18, but the legal age of drinking in Japan is 20.

²⁵ In Japan, people under 20 are not allowed to smoke. Ai Kago, born in 1988, was 18 at the time when she was caught redhanded.

Fans and Fandom

Fandom refers to the fans of a famous person or a group of fans and activities that surround their interest. (Thefreedictionary.com) Fan culture, or fandom, is a big part of a fan's life. Some may participate in fandom more than others but all are a part of it. *Aidoru* rely on fans to support them and they are vital to an *aidoru*'s existence.

Gender separates their fandom in time and space. Typically, women constitute the majority of fan club members; as such, they attend concerts, and occasionally parties; write song requests to radio and television stations; buy the singer's latest cassette or CD; and sometimes sing his songs, either privately or in the company of friends. Much of a woman's day can be spent on fan club activities, if she chooses. (Kelly, 2004)

Kelly's description of fan-star relationship is quite accurate. From this author's experience, fans do all of those things and more nowadays: they write fictional stories, make fan videos, organize gatherings amongst other things. Fan culture has grown and thrived with the fans and taken a life of its own. Being in a fandom enable fans to communicate with other fans, and nurture their feelings. It is a huge part of a fan's life, where they can get all the information they want, buy for each other merchandise and/or sell them, write fictional stories starring their favorites and so on. It can get almost addictive to be a part of one, and it can enrich your fan experience: whether or not the enrichment is due to obnoxious fans or good ones.

Many studies have been done on both fans and fandom. For fans, being in a fandom is like being in a miniature community, with rules and guidelines to be followed. It gives them easy access to share works with other fans, and since they all share the same interest, they can easily talk about anything in relation to their interest, in this case, *aidoru*. Fans are usually very respectful, and do not care what other fans like or dislike in regards to fandom. Sometimes viewpoints can clash, and that can lead to so-called 'fan wars': "The community is open to anyone willing to participate, but closed to anyone who might jeer, or worse, blow the whistle." (Bacon-Smith, 1992:3) If this happens in an *aidoru* group's fandom, this can lead to fans insulting or hating a member of the group, the fans of that member defending him and insulting back, and other similar incidents. Some fans discriminate against other fans: for instance saying that if you do not buy *aidoru* merchandise that you are not a true fan, some are discriminated against their choice of pairing and some just think of themselves as superior to other fans for having been a fan longer. Many fans can also seem obnoxious and defensive to someone outside of the fandom, which can lead to people judging the whole fan base based on that single fan. However, there are fans that are reluctant to showcase their interest in *aidoru* outside the fandom.

One Kyoko Koizumi did an interesting research on popular music in Japanese high schools. Its conclusion was that in a formal situation, male students tended to hide their

personal popular music tastes, whilst girls tried to camouflage them by answering negatively to every question. (Koizumi, 2002) She had asked a girl about her interest in *aidoru* music, but she kept responding negatively to every question, or evaded it. During a short student exchange at a Japanese high school in 2010 it was noted that students seemed not overly keen to share their tastes in popular music. However, from time to time they mentioned interest in *aidoru*, but mostly outside the classroom. This is interesting as whilst *aidoru* are noticeably and quantifiably popular, not everyone is willing to mention that they are a fan of them in formal situations.

Fans have other means of showing that they are a fan, because *aidoru* have something called 'fan clubs'. Those who are members of an official fan club get greater opportunities to buy tickets, and are able to receive various perks and every year fan clubs release newsletters every, or every other, month.

The organization of fandom by and around commercial industries in Japan does not lessen the emotional grip among members or invalidate its community of ardent fans. The charisma of a popular singer may (or may not) be individually derived but its maintenance by a profit-seeking music industry forms the basis of fandom in Japan (Yano, 1997)

Concerts make for an interesting example. *Aidoru* usually market *aidoru* goods dedicated to the current concert tours at the venues where the concert is held, and there is always a long line of fans wanting to buy them. Concerts are also the *aidoru*'s way of 'paying back' their fans by making them happy, and giving them a chance to see their *aidoru* up close. Arashi, for example, had a tour last year called Arafes, and they asked their fans to choose the songs they wanted them to perform. The fans were overjoyed at this opportunity to directly affect their favorite *aidoru*, and even foreign fans voted for songs to be sung during the concert tour. Giving fans direct opportunities to affect their favorite *aidoru*, whether it is concerts or handshake events (amongst other things), can give them a certain purpose as well as benefit the *aidoru* themselves.

If *aidoru* are toast, then the fandom is both the spread and the toppings. If *aidoru* had no fan base, they would disappear off the market fast. It is therefore essential for them to show that they do appreciate their fans, and give them something only they can give. For foreign fans, fandom is the only thing that can help with keeping their interest in a group afloat, because CDs and DVDs are not easy to come by outside of Japan. Their participation in it is a way to support their *aidoru*, sharing opinions, materials and so forth. They are not just passive receptors, they are producers of material related to their favorite *aidoru* group or pairing. Many tend to have a 'ship,' basically two people which they like to pair together, and often as a couple. This leads to many types of fan fiction, fictional stories written by fans, to see the light of day, and in particular, slash (i.e. gay) fiction: "Thousands of women have written or created visual art about their favorite media characters." (Bacon-Smith, 1992:5) Some fans provide musical covers of their favorite *aidoru* group's song, either singing or

playing an instrument. Some fans provide shows with English subtitles; in return those who download the material cannot share outside of the community or for profit. Therefore, posting a survey in a foreign fandom was a good opportunity to find out what foreign fans think of the Japanese *aidoru* industry.

The definition of *aidoru*, the reasons for their popularity and what cultural values and purposes they serve.

Many people might find it strange that there are *aidoru* fans outside of Japan, despite the language barrier and cultural differences. Therefore, in order to find out what attracted foreign fans to *aidoru*, this question was left open, and resulted in a wide variety of responses. Most seemed to define *aidoru* as influential entertainers: someone for people to admire and aspire to become, inspirational and seemingly natural with alluring personalities, characters and good looks. One respondent claimed “A lot of them are fake.” This perception is interesting, and it is very true: *aidoru* are manufactured with an image in mind, based on their character, so they are ‘fake’ in the sense of the word. However, despite this ‘fakeness’, *aidoru* also possess other tributes which can be used to describe them.

There were a couple of answers that were particularly interesting: one of them declared that *aidoru* were people who cheered you up and gave inspiration and motivations to their fans, and that non-fans would not feel the same way.²⁶ This author is in-between regarding this comment, he disagrees that non-fans cannot feel the same way about someone being inspirational or motivational (since that has nothing to do with whether you are a fan or not) yet fans tend to be able to find this inspiration and motivation in much smaller things than non-fans would.

Another interesting response was that *aidoru* groups were put together to appeal to a given demographic and that they adopted Western music styles and integrated them into Eastern culture.²⁷ Although Western influences are many in Japanese music, Japanese pop has a distinct feeling to it, so very different than in the Western world: it seems a lot more innocent and, you could even say, a lot safer in terms of lyrics. Despite there being similar elements in both Eastern and Western music, they are different. The part about the Western integration into Eastern culture rings true: *aidoru* are a great weapon to project Eastern values and culture through Westernized sound, and influence the youth through it.

Another response told “People who allow others to dream.” There were also other responses that based around the thought of a ‘dream’²⁸. This begs the question: just what are the fans’ dreams? There seems to be a trend amongst fans shown in their desire to go to Japan as well as see, and experience, their favorite *aidoru* in their own skin.

²⁶ “Someone who cheers you up every time and gives inspirations and motivations to their fans. *not-fans wouldn’t feel the same way.*”

²⁷ “A group manufactured/put together to appeal to a given demographic, adopting Western music styles and integrating them into Eastern culture.”

²⁸ „A living dream,” and „An all around talent that has the gift to give others dreams” were also answers given.

The responses to the question “What cultural values and purposes do you think idols serve and why do you think they are popular?” give great insight through the fans observations into Japanese cultural elements and the meaning of *aidoru* values. There were fans that felt that *aidoru* did not serve any cultural values. People have different opinions as to what counts as cultural values and purposes, thus to many, *aidoru* are just there to serve as entertainment. However, a lot of respondents seemed to find some cultural values and purposes being promoted.

One lengthy response stated that they promote the culture of their country, in other words, that non-Japanese speaking people might become motivated to learn Japanese because of their favorite *aidoru* and that they are inspired to work hard towards their goals: especially because *aidoru* try to serve as good examples, have good attitudes and confidence and they work hard and remain humble.²⁹ This author also wanted to add to this that *aidoru* are really good at promoting their country’s culture onto its own population. The other elements that this respondent refers to are all good reasons as to why *aidoru* are and continue to be popular.

There were many similar responses that stated how they felt that *aidoru* were a way for people to ‘escape’ real life, forget their worries and have harmless fun. One fan added that they might also be a way to express conformity:

At least in Japan, I believe idols act as a way to escape ‘real life.’ I think it's also a way to express conformity, which is encouraged rather than frowned up as it is in western culture.

This seems very plausible: Japan values conformity over individualism and *aidoru* try to promote healthy images and Japanese-like ideals onto the population. Because Japanese children learn at school early on how to be a part of a group, and to enjoy the advantages of their new identities as members of a group and that sometimes, in their own interest, it is better to put self-interest second. (Hendry, 1995:52) *Aidoru* are a great influence factor on the development of these thoughts, and can help to install them further into a young brain.

One very interesting response by a fan states that whilst the *aidoru* industry aims to cater to the Japanese public, the exotic familiarity of the things they do appeals to a foreign audience. Same fan also wrote that many people have likened Japan to a country of children, and that the fan thinks that *aidoru* are created from that realization and created to continue that way of thinking: that they exist and are popular because people need an outlet for relaxation and many find it through watching cute people on television.³⁰

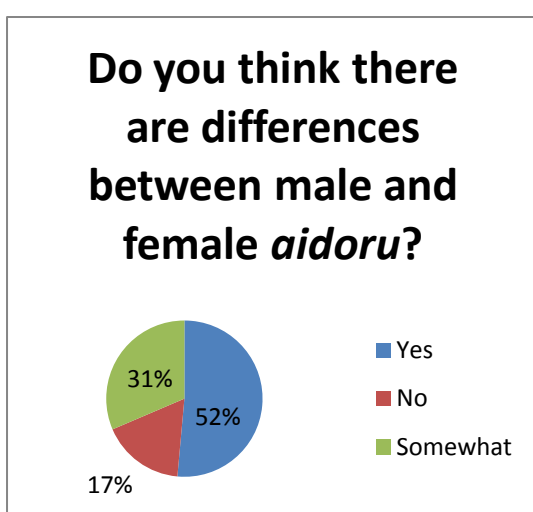
²⁹ “They promote the culture of their countries. Eg. Non-Japanese speaking people might be motivated to learn Japanese because of their Japanese idols. Besides, idols also inspire people to work hard towards their goals by serving as good examples. Because of their talents, good attitudes, and self-confidence. They are talented, work hard, and yet remain humble despite their popularity. Their confidence and aura on stage are also very attractive.”

³⁰ I think that while the idol industry is basically inward-looking - that is, they determinedly cater to the Japanese public - something about the exotic familiarity of the things they do as entertainers appeals to foreign audiences. Some have said

Foreign fans, as well as Japanese fans, get a way to easily learn about Japanese culture and experiencing it for themselves through their favorite *aidoru*. Because *aidoru* are supposedly 'cute,' they feel safe to the audience, and watching them can be relaxing for the fans. Because they provide this relaxing, trusting feeling, many *aidoru* groups have gained popularity, such as Johnny's groups. Although most answers seemed to state that *aidoru* had some kind of cultural purpose, there were two or three who thought that *aidoru* did not serve any particular purposes. They are most likely just there to entertain people, with no real values behind it.³¹

This is an easily debatable subject. Although *aidoru*'s only job seems to be to entertain people, they can also be easily crafted into role models. However, these types of role models can differ based on the gender of the *aidoru*.

The differences between male and female *aidoru*, and the possible reasons for it.



When discussing the image of male and female *aidoru*, the image of crazed, screaming fangirls and *otaku*³²-esque (or obsessed) fanboys might immediately spring to mind. Whilst both of these are true to a point, the reality is that the fans' genders for both *aidoru* are varied. The same can be said about the expectations of the gender of *aidoru*. Just over half of the respondents (54 people) said they felt there were definite differences between male and female *aidoru*, 17 felt there were none at all and 31 said there were only some differences. To elaborate

on the answer, a non-mandatory question was included asking the people who answered to further discuss their viewpoint.

There seemed to be a basic, unanimous understanding by the fans on the difference between the demographics of male and female groups, and the expectations from them. Most of the answers seemed to state how female *aidoru* are encouraged to act cute in order to sell, whilst male *aidoru* have different selling points. Many also stated that men seemed

that Japan is a country of children, and I think idols are both created out of that realization and created to perpetuate that status quo. In a word, I think cute people exist on TV because Japan's overworked labor force needs to find an outlet for relaxation. And idols are popular because they provide exactly that.

³¹ There are no cultural values I think, because I believe what idols do is to perform, to entertain. so, for idols to get popular, they might have 2 things, 1st is quality in which they posses, and 2nd is the way they fulfill their fans' or audience's wishes, so fans also help them to become popular.

³² *Otaku* is a Japanese term used to describe people that obsess over their interest, and is usually used to refer to fans of *anime* and *manga*, but not exclusively. The term is used pejoratively in Japan, but many *anime* fans in the US like to refer themselves as *otaku* and identify with and pride themselves on being one.

to endure longer in the *aidoru* industry than women, and that being “cute” had an expiration date.

There were also answers from the ones who had placed “no” as their answer, stating that *aidoru* are *aidoru* no matter the gender, and they are both unique in their own ways. Gender has nothing to do with being an *aidoru*, but their work does. As previously mentioned, female *aidoru* seem to be punished way harsher than male *aidoru* have ever been, and this could stem from the fact that gender issues in Japan are changing: in a recent poll by the Japanese government, 51% of the population believes that women should raise the family at home whilst men work. (Michel, 2013) Work might differ based on their gender, and many female *aidoru* group members graduate once they have reached a certain age, but they are still *aidoru*. Men seem to have a much easier time: there is no graduation process with male *aidoru* groups, and many can recover well from scandals. This has nothing to do with them being *aidoru*, but with Japanese society itself: there are different values set for men and women, and although it seems to be slowly changing for the better (with the current economic reality), Japanese society seems not yet willing to accept the change. (Bauwens, 2013)

Aidoru have different expectation placed on them based on their gender, which can affect them heavily. Women do well in the business if they are cute, but men are not expected to be so. Yet, liking an *aidoru* is not affected by gender, but by the *aidoru* themselves and the image they portray.

Why the fans like the *aidoru* group they are fans of, and how long they have been fans.

As can be expected, fans like different things in their *aidoru* and like the saying goes, “different strokes for different folks.” Most fans state how their *aidoru* group’s humor, smiles, music, shows and attitudes make them like the group. The Arashi fans wrote that one of the main reasons they like the group is that the image they project seems so genuine: their personalities seem real, they have great harmony, they are relatable and they motivate the fans to achieve their dreams. They appear to fans as if they show themselves the way they really are: laughing about their mistakes and showing themselves as simple people.³³

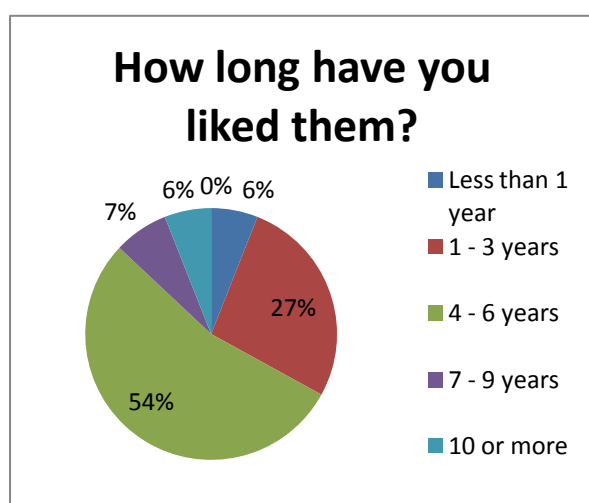
A considerable number of fans also wrote that their favorite group helped them through really tough times to see the light and to be strong. One fan wrote that she was able to smile again because of her favorite group, and that if she had not discovered them, she would not be alive anymore:

Because of their music I was able to smile again. If I wouldn't have discovered a music video of them on youtube, I wouldn't even be alive

³³ “They show themselves the way they really are. If they make a mistake, they laugh. If they have to dress up like a horse, they'll do it and enjoy it. They show themselves like simple people.”

anymore. I wanted to commit suicide and because of this one group I'm able to laugh and enjoy myself again.

Similar experiences have been observed throughout the years from various fans about how their favorite *aidoru* have kept them from taking their own lives and enjoy it again. Many fans tend to connect with their favorite *aidoru* emotionally, depending on them to be almost like a substitute friend or someone to look up to. On private discussion forums, many fans have talked about how they have become much happier after becoming fans of their favorite group: some have overcome their depression, or from being bullied.³⁴ These kind of forums provide emotional and psychological support, by being a great source for such fans to open up and vent to other fellow fans that have gone through the same hurdles as themselves. These results would seem to indicate that for some fans there is a necessity for *aidoru* or *aidoru*-like communities to exist, as there are people out there that need the motivation and influence they bring forth. For other fans, they feel no necessity for them, they are merely glad to be entertained by their favorite group.



It was interesting to note that according to the responses most fans had liked their favorite group for a relatively long period of time, which means that they have been fans long enough to form an opinion on Japanese *aidoru* culture. Despite there being no question regarding gender, it is known within the fandom questioned that most fans are of the female gender, and the likelihood of male fans answering are very slim.

From out of 100 people, 54 answered that they had been fans for 4 to 6 years at the time this survey was conducted. The second largest group was 1 to 3 years, with 27 people. Third largest group was 7 to 9 years, with 7 people. The fourth largest groups were both “Less than a year as a fan” and “10 years and more” groups, both with 6 people.

Based on these results we can assume that most members of an online fandom have been fans for longer than a year. There are many various reasons to why they continue to be a fan of the *aidoru* they like, whether it is personality or influence.

The influence *aidoru* have on fans' lifestyles, and what keeps them as fans

As mentioned previously, being a fan in a fandom is just like being a part of a community, and those within the same fandom identify themselves as part of *that* fandom.

³⁴ For further information, the discussion can be found at [<http://aibakaland.forumup.org/viewtopic.php?t=3156>].

Many fans pride themselves in being fans of a particular *aidoru* or *aidoru* groups and many tend to rile up other groups' fans, proclaiming their *aidoru* is better and start a comparison war. This form of idolatry is also common amongst fans of Western singers: some Madonna fans would wear similar clothing to look like her, Lady Gaga has loyal fans that identify themselves as 'little monsters' and Justin Bieber's die-hard fans are known under the name 'Beliebers' many professing their undying love to him. Many fans are fiercely loyal to their fandom, and would do anything to 'protect' their favorite or want them to be number one: take for example, when Beliebers would do anything to make Justin Bieber be the most followed person on twitter. (Rosenblatt, 2012)

Fans look up to their *aidoru* and many project their expectation or self-image on them. Some seem to seek for similarities between themselves and their favorite *aidoru*, or even change themselves from being influenced by them. Some fans apply qualities to themselves in hopes of being similar or a good reflection of their *aidoru*. The respondents to the survey were attracted to the group's appeal: naturalness, harmony, and personalities. In some cases, music and television brought the fan's attention to them, but the reasons that keep them a fan are mostly due to the *aidoru* themselves. It is easy to see the appeal the *aidoru* have and what draws people to them.

In the Arashi fandom, it is infamous that a lot of fans were "Jun-bait." This title means that a lot of fans were baited into the fandom through Jun Matsumoto, who stars in a lot of romantic dramas (such as Hana Yori Dango) and many people were introduced to the group through him. Many fans have talked about how, in this case Arashi, their variety shows and music has allowed them to love the group as well, and become even bigger fans than before. A fair few responses stated that what kept them as fans was how genuine they were responding to their fans and the general public:

Originally it was the music, but as I started following their other activities, it got more and more interesting. That's one of the appeals. What keeps me a fan is the genuity in their response to fans as well as the general public, which is apparent in the programs in which they appear or host.³⁵

For Arashi fans, it seems that the group's genuine feelings of gratitude towards their fans, helps to draw in fans and keep them as fans longer. Through variety shows, fans are able to connect with their *aidoru* and get to know them better. If the group's appeal is broad enough, it can hold many fans longer.

There were some fans who claimed that their favorite group did not affect or influence their lifestyle, that the group was merely a form of escapism. However, other fans spoke about how their favorite group helped them gain an interest in Japanese culture and language.

³⁵ The spelling mistakes were in the original comment and have been left unrevised.

One particular fan responded that she has become more active and laughed a lot more, and that she does things now she did not do before.³⁶ There were many other similar responses: that the group made them much happier than before, they helped them smile and enjoy the good life, try things they would never dare to have done before and so on. There was one fan that stated that he/she was an introvert type, but with the help of her favorite group he/she had become more confident with facing new people and making friends.

This is unique in the sense that *aidoru* also help foreign fans to become aware and invested in a different culture (in this case, Japan) than their own. The fans want to know more about the things surrounding their favorite *aidoru*, and most, if not all, fans develop huge interest in the culture and language. Most fans try to buy their favorite *aidoru*'s merchandise, as a way of proclaiming support to their *aidoru*.

Fans and *aidoru* merchandise: the estimated amounts fans have spent on their favorite *aidoru*.

Aidoru gain profit from the merchandise they have for sale. They gain most of their money through CD and DVD sales, but revenue also comes from books, concerts as well as merchandise sold at concerts (including bags, penlights and official photosets of them). Sometimes they include special treats for their fans, such as making-of videos of music videos, and behind-the-scenes at concerts. Should they star in films, it has been observed that most people who go see the movies at the theater are fans of that particular *aidoru*, and many films generate good profit because of that. They can also profit from magazine sales. At times, fans also generate income from other fans with *doujinshi*, or fan made comics, in which fans draw stories based on their favorite *aidoru*: for example, it is popular with male *aidoru* fans to make homoerotic stories.

Although there were some that had not spent money on anything, a large majority of the fans had spent good amounts on *aidoru* merchandise in support of their favorites. A big portion of fans speculated they had spent amounts ranging up to 1000 US dollars for merchandise. There were also many that estimated their amount ranging from \$1000 up to \$5000 for merchandise. One fan in her 20s even said she spent around \$600 to \$1200 every year on merchandise, depending on what is released those years.

From the results, those in their teenage years have generally not spent a lot on their favorite group. One fan was not sure how much he/she spent, 4 fans spent less than \$100, 7 fans spent between \$100 and \$1000, 2 fans spent over \$1000 and 2 fans were not sure how much they have spent. For fans in their 30s, 6 fans spent between \$100 and \$1000 on merchandise, 3 fans spent over \$1000, and one fan was not sure of the amount. The sole fan over the age of 50 wrote that she had spent around \$250 last year.

³⁶ "Yes. I laugh more and become more active. I do things I've never done before, like talking in front of a whole school. I make more friends and become more friendly."

The largest group of participants was the 72 fans in their 20s. 11 fans had spent nothing on their favorite group, and 8 people spent less than \$100. 35 fans spent between \$100~\$999 on their favorite group and 15 spent more than \$1000. One fan was not sure of the amount spent, and 2 fans wrote that they had spent “a lot.”

Fans are supportive of their favorite groups, and if they could, many would love to buy everything their group releases if they had the money. Japanese fans have an easier time to access *aidoru* goods than foreign fans: they can get some stuff for little money whilst foreign fans have to pay a lot more for the stuff they buy. Foreign fans do their best to show their support for their favorite group, despite the high prices.

Conclusion

Although foreign fans do not experience Japanese culture the same way that the Japanese do, they give us interesting insights and thoughts regarding the *aidoru* system. Fans are of all shapes and sizes, male and female: it just depends on the demographic of each group or individual *aidoru* whether or not the fan base is largely male or female. For this survey, there was a high probability that the 100 people who answered were all female; as it has been observed that the majority of the fan base in general is female. Fans are also of all ages, from kids and young adults to older people even in their sixties and seventies, proving that *aidoru* can reach people of any age. However, most foreign fans seem to be in their twenties or thirties; most likely due to the fact that these age groups use the internet the most. They are for the people to enjoy and admire, and seek to strive towards. They can help many through hardships and bring a smile to their faces.

Aidoru are also a great source of export for Japan: they can conjure up interest in the language and culture, and attract new visitors to the country. Many fans spend a large amount of money on their favorite *aidoru*, wishing to express their gratitude and support through bought merchandise. In the end, they can be a great source of income for businesses, providing entertainment and selling merchandise. Foreign fans are just as affected by *aidoru* as Japanese fans, despite not being the focus group towards which the material is marketed towards. As the saying goes “distance makes the heart grow fonder,” foreign fans may spend hours behind the computer screen to catch the latest news of their favorites, buy merchandise online and chat with other fans, as well as contribute to their fandom. Some fans write fan fiction, those who live in Japan might share the latest gossip or news, and some might even share television shows with the rest of the fandom. Some fans save up for a trip to Japan so that they can study the language or try to get as close to their *aidoru* as possible, or both. There have been fans whose favorite *aidoru* have helped them overcome any difficulties they have had to endure in their lives, and to many fans, they are an encouragement.

Aidoru may seem fake to many, but there is also a hint of truth behind the supposed façade. *Aidoru* want to strive towards making their fans happy, which in turn, makes them happy. They are well-liked by most and loved by many, and are an essential element in the entertainment industry: to their fans, they bring sincerity, goodness, and ideas, as well as influence the fans through their actions. They also bring a sense of security to their fans, a desire many want to have, as well as a sense of satisfaction, or stability. Fan communities help strengthen this by providing all the latest information on *aidoru*, as well as providing services to fans: exchanging information and helping other fans find materials, as well as obtain the latest shows. Fan communities can also provide emotional support, for they are made up of people sharing interest in the same things and a place where fans can make friends with other fans, and have fun. Fan communities are important because without a place for the fans to gather and share their thoughts, the *aidoru* would not gain as much popularity. These communities are made visible by fans to others, thus providing a helpful community, wherein new fans are eagerly accepted. Once fans become members of the community, they can share and contribute to the communal collection and thus, help increasing the popularity of the *aidoru* or *aidoru* group in question. Fans are fans, and it does not matter whether or not they speak the same language nor possess the same regional background knowledge. *Aidoru* influence and surpass language-and cultural barriers, bringing likeminded people together across vast distances. Many fans have become encouraged to be open to newer things as well.

Just like with Western artists, *aidoru* have a large fan base willing to support them. *Aidoru* seem well aware of their fans' support, whether foreign or home-based, and try their best to continue and please their fans through their continuous hard work. Thus, after the long, stress-filled years of being shaped and developed into a well-liked *aidoru*, in the end, their ultimate job is to make their fans happy, and the fans respond in kind by forming communities that continually support them.

Appendix

Q1. What is your age range?

- ☐ Less than 10
- ☐ 10 – 19
- ☐ 20 – 29
- ☐ 30 – 39
- ☐ 40 – 49
- ☐ Older than 50

Q2. How would you define idols?

Q3. What cultural values and purposes do you think they serve? Why do you think they are so popular?

Q4. Do you think there's a difference between male and female idols?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Somewhat

Q5. Why do you think that is?

Q6. Why do you like the idol group you're a fan of?

Q7. How long have you liked them?

Q8. What drew you to your favorite group and what keeps you a fan?

Q9. Does your favorite group affect or influence your lifestyle? How so?

Q10. Have you ever bought merchandise related to your favorite group? If so, how much would you estimate the amount you've spent?

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