The characteristics of manga fan communities – preliminary observations of 16 teenage manga readers in the UK

This article presents the results of a research project that explored young British readers' engagement with manga in literary, aesthetic, social and cultural dimensions. Sixteen school pupils from two secondary schools participated in a number of interviews to provide feedback on selected manga and their own participation in manga fandom. The results show that four distinct features characterise this particular cultural group, including exclusivity, competitiveness, defensiveness and transculturalism. This article aims to discuss these features by exploring the political roots of popular culture, the constant negotiation of power both outwardly and inwardly in fandom, and the fan's desire to engage with an exotic culture through the text. It is noteworthy that the declaration of one's identity as a manga fan shows a deep level of passion with which fans demonstrate confidence in their expertise and a determination to defend a taste that is considered illegitimate and degraded by institutional authorities.

Keywords: manga; popular culture; fandom; social power; Japanese elements

The late 20th century saw the manga (comic books originating in Japan) market extend overseas to the United States and Europe. This market blossomed at the beginning of the early 21th century, thanks to the wide penetration of anime on TV and DVDs that boosted the popularity of manga in these areas (Ito 2008; Bouissou et al. 2010). As manga has attracted a significant number of readers in countries such as France, Italy, Germany and Spain, it has also contributed to the dynamics of comics culture in the UK and become an indispensable part of the Japanese popular culture pursued by a great deal of young people. For example, in the biannual MCM London Comic Con[1], manga and anime have been one of the primary features in the exhibitions and a popular choice of theme for costume play[2] (hereafter referred to as Cosplay) among the participants. According to the managing director of the British publisher, SelfMadeHero, sales of graphic novels in the UK made a 98 percent increase in the volumes sold from 2004 to 2005, and manga, under the broader category of graphic novels, underwent a rapid growth in sales. Having observed this, the director decided to launch the company with the *Manga Shakespeare* series in 2007. A group of UK artists were commissioned to turn Shakespeare's plays into full-length manga so as to 'introduce teenagers or first-time readers to the work of William Shakespeare via a medium they understood' (Hayley 2010, 168-269). As a latecomer to the scene, SelfMadeHero successfully introduced manga as a material for entertainment as well as education.

The popularity of manga in the UK has formed a significant cultural phenomenon in which a group of fans engage themselves not only with the reading of manga, but also Japanese culture and various activities initiated by or for them. Although manga readers range from children to adults, the manga-reading habit seems to form at an early age. According to a survey conducted in France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland by the Manga Network from 2006 to 2007, 44.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they started reading manga between ages of ten to fourteen, while 12.5 per cent started before the age of ten and 29 per cent during their high school years (Bouissou et al. 2010). In order to understand why young British readers choose to engage themselves with this exotic text and how they commit themselves to the subculture of manga, I decided to interview readers from ages 10 to 15 (Years 7 to 10).

This choice was made for the purpose of ensuring the participation of a sufficient number of students who were keen on manga and not yet caught up in studies for GCSE (The General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams. This article will present part of the findings obtained in this study, with a focus on characteristics of this particular group of manga fans – exclusivity, competitiveness, defensiveness and transculturalism. I will first provide a literature review on the political roots of popular cultures and the pursuit of Japanese culture in manga fandom. Thereafter, I will present excerpts of the interviews to illustrate the characteristics of this particular manga fan group. This study is exploratory by nature and the findings are not intended to generalise to all manga readerships in the UK, but to explain a small group of participants, and to provide a basis for future studies in larger scales.

Opposition and competition in manga fandom

Culture expresses beliefs, values, and ways of living that are shared by a particular group of people. These shared codes bring cohesion to a group, whilst marking out its distinction from other groups. Swartz (1997) explicates French ethnographer Pierre Bourdieu's sociological ideas that locate cultural conventions within the social structure, using the term – *Habitus*. Bourdieu's *habitus* represents a system of circular relations that connect social structures and the practices within them. Culture formed within this system is an expression of political content, as the unequal distribution of resources stratifies a society into fields of power in which individuals and groups struggle over social resources and pursue their own interests. These interests motivate actions and draw out social distinctions that are maintained by strict discrimination between social groups. Therefore, culture can be classified as highbrow culture and popular culture because of the unbalanced share of power within society.

Drawing on Bourdieu's ideas, Jenkins (1992) explains that some tastes seem natural to a particular group of people because these tastes have been reinforced by social exchanges and rationalised through encounters with educational institutes. Fundamentally, the distinction between good and bad taste is rooted in social practices and reflects class interests. Thus, those who 'naturally' possess 'good' taste gain privileged positions within the institutional hierarchy and enjoy advantages in the educational system, whilst those who possess other tastes are considered as intellectually immature or undeveloped. Unfortunately, comics have historically been considered as bad taste, and their devoted readers are sometimes thought to be simple and less literate than others.

In this context, manga has struggled to gain status equal to classic literature in terms of art and literary values. As a result, people who choose to participate in this popular culture often experience tension and opposition from opinions representing the hegemonic power that owns the so-called 'good taste'. Fiske (1989a) argues that popular culture is formed by the subordinate or disempowered group of people in society. They develop their own culture that allows them to make meanings of their interests, which are not usually valorised within the dominant ideology. However, the act of producing meanings of their own affords pleasures to the participants in a popular culture because it is fundamentally resistant to and evasive of the dominant ideology. Thus, manga, as a popular cultural text that is meant to speak to and for the general public, generates a cultural site where the hegemonic power and the subordinate power negotiate.

However, not all members of a popular culture choose to engage with a text for the purpose of opposing the dominant culture or rebelling against the authority in their social environment, even though their participation in the culture inevitably involves these conflicts. Locke (2012) suggests that the notion of class or age does not necessarily have to do with a fan's engagement with comic books. Instead, every fan generates their own sets of meanings and activities that essentially derive from their love for the medium and stories it tells. Nonetheless, the interview cases that his argument is based on clearly show that comics fans constantly strive to negotiate their ways around negative predicates that are associated with them within populist discourse.

Ironically, while fans often stand as a united group in opposition to the official culture, they seem to replicate the way official culture invests in 'cultural capital' to obtain social status within the fan community. Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital may exist in an objectified form, such as books, works of art, and scientific instruments that require specialised cultural abilities to use. Individuals and groups employ strategies to accumulate cultural capital in order to maintain or enhance their positions in the social world (Swartz 1997). Manga fans are seen to invest in 'unofficial cultural capital' by collecting manga and related commodities, drawing manga, hand-making costumes for Cosplay and visiting conventions regularly. These activities express the fan's passion for and specialised knowledge of manga, resulting in an increased social standing in the fan community. For example, Brown (2012) noticed in his study that there is a hierarchy within a fan group based on individual fans' knowledge and experience of comics. The fans enjoyed being seen as experts of superhero comics because of their clothing – the superhero T-shirts that indicated a higher level of popular cultural capital possessed by them in comparison to those possessed by more casual fans. Further, Freedman, Heijnen, Kallio-Tavin, Kárpáti and Papp (2013) point out that 'insider knowledge' is about its cultures of practice, which concurs with Jenkins' (1992) finding that fandom is a 'participatory culture'. Insider knowledge is not simply knowledge about the text, but also about ways to practise it. One of the female Cosplayers that Freedman and others interviewed said, 'Reading books is okay for outsiders, but if you want to enter the culture, to really get inside, you have to do things and be things' (p. 110). Thus, fans draw distinctions between themselves, as they compete over their knowledge and access to the object of fandom and the status that they obtain in the fan community.

Although competition and discrimination exist in fan groups, a supportive culture is also present. In their ethnographic research on fans' consumption of anime[3], Fennell and colleagues (2013) discovered that these fans helped each other gain knowledge of anime. They translated words, interpreted cultural issues and explained the clothes that characters wear. In this way, the more experienced and knowledgeable fans taught the less experienced ones knowledge of a particular anime. As the beginner fans accumulated knowledge by talking to other fans, they gradually became more knowledgeable and qualified to be in the position to teach others. Thus, fans' knowledge is converted to social capital as they exchange their expertise for a senior and respectable status in the fan community.

Fundamentally, manga fandom is established by a fan's passion for the text. Although disapproval of manga by the official culture leads to tension between insiders and outsiders, and results in the fan's constant struggle to legitimise their engagement with the text, fandom is a microcosm of society where power and status are decided by the degree of capital that members own. While members support each other to achieve knowledge of manga so as to sustain the collective culture of fandom, the degree of

commitment that fans make and knowledge they earn by reading manga grant them different statuses. Thus, the phenomenon of opposition and competition is observed in manga fandom.

Considering manga fandom in the UK context, we see a transcultural phenomenon that is prominent in relation to the text and readers. In the following discussion, I will examine the pursuit of Japanese culture in manga fandom and related concerns.

The pursuit of Japanese-ness in manga fandom

The Japanese cultural root in manga is part of the attraction manga holds for overseas fans. Pellitteri (2011) argues that Japanese elements are pervasive in manga and anime in the appearance, themes, names, landscapes, customs, habits, and even moral messages that are conditioned by the author's culture, national ethos and milieu. Napier (2001) analyses anime – the side-by-side product of manga – and identifies Japanese references in it. However, she also points out that there is a phenomenon of de-Japanisation (e.g. characters do not look particularly Japanese) in anime to serve the purpose of providing an alternative world to the Japanese audience who seek to escape the reality of present-day Japan. Hence, Napier argues that the de-Japanised 'otherness' offers a space for both Japanese and non-Japanese audiences to explore their identities. She concludes her observation of Western audiences to anime: 'it appears that it is the "Otherness" of anime rather than its specific "Japanese-ness" that is one of its fundamental appeals to the fans' (p. 255). This claim, however, does not adequately explain why some Western manga readers choose to engage themselves further with Japanese culture by visiting Japan or learning the Japanese language[4]. Neither can it justify the series of policies that the Japanese government made to use manga and anime as a new form of soft power to promote its own culture worldwide in addition to boosting the national economy.

The overseas readership of manga has experienced significant growth in the last twenty years, partly because the circulation of scanlated[5] manga by fans on the Internet sped up the penetration of these media overseas. Lee (2014) suggests that the fandom of manga is transnational and transcultural, tied to a positive recognition of the country of origin and its culture in general. The distance between the fan's local culture and Japanese culture induces a desire to explore this exotic culture so as to make better sense of the text. As a result, overseas fans can become an object of Japan's nation branding projects, which purposively treat overseas fans as the market for cultural export and tourism. This argument, however, fails to see the other side of this fact; that is, the success that fans have achieved in turning the hegemonic power from rejecting manga to recognising its cultural and economic value.

The pursuit of the Japanese culture among overseas fans of manga has also posed a challenge to fans' national identity, as fans embrace and prioritise the exotic culture of manga over their local culture. Hills (2002b) points out that Western fans downplay and deactivate their national identity as they develop a wider interest in Japan and Japanese culture on the basis of their manga/anime fandom. However, he also argues that Western fans implicitly or explicitly exhibit their national identity when they draw on stereotypical connotations of Japanese-ness, including technologised power, flawed heroism and fanaticism. By doing so, they legitimise manga/ anime fan culture as transcultural. Fans support this fandom's cultural values by pointing out national differences; that is, elements of 'otherness' in their eyes, so as to infuse

'self' and 'otherness' into a new identity of *otaku* (a term referring to hard-core fans of manga). Therefore, according to Hills, the term *otaku* is, 'in its transcultural circulation, a "shifter": a mobile sign of self and other, simultaneously exoticising and legitimating the self-as-other and the other-as-self' (p. 13).

The transcultural phenomenon of manga displays the soft power of this media in selling the Japanese culture and brand overseas. It also complicates the notion of authenticity in terms of the transnational fan's taste and definition of manga. While concerns about fans being victims of the industry continue to exist in any opposition to popular cultural texts, the meanings that individual fans make of manga and their passionate engagement with the country of origin draw our attention to the fan's engagement with the wider world through this media. This viewpoint motivated my investigation into a particular group of fans' views concerning their commitment to manga. The following discussion will present findings regarding the observed characteristics of this cultural group, beginning with a brief account of the methodology.

The case study

Sixteen keen manga readers, aged between 10 and 15, were invited to join discussions on three pre-selected manga and share about their participation in the fandom of manga. The participants came from two secondary schools in London, and were divided into groups by gender in each school, resulting in a total of four groups for this study. Each group received three group interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, followed by one individual interview, lasting between 25 and 40 minutes per student. The data was collected between May and June in 2013, with an additional visit in March 2014 to follow up on themes that emerged during the process of data analysis. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language in both schools is above average. However, only 3 out of the 16 participants in this study did not consider English as their first language and all except one claimed that they had grown up in the UK. All the participants and their parents gave consent to the researcher with regard to the methods of data collection and the use of the collected data. Names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms in this article.

Characteristics of manga fan communities

The students in this study identified themselves as fans of manga who showed zealous interest in the text and performed certain rituals of this culture. Their definition of manga fans shows that passion and knowledge are indicators that they used to include like-minded people and exclude others. A fan's extreme passion for manga leads to their active participation in the text, which builds up the fan's knowledge of manga. The knowledge that the fan accumulates becomes a form of cultural capital, which allows them to secure social status in the fan community. Thus, the fan community of manga is a mirror of a larger society, where distribution of power and resources stratifies the structure. Whilst fans compete with each other over the knowledge of manga, their loyalty to this text unites them in defence against external criticisms. In addition, they share a common 'fan demand' for the elements of 'Japanese-ness' or 'otherness' in manga. The findings that follow will be presented according to these key characteristics.

Fan identity and the exclusivity of fan communities

Exclusivity is essential to the nature of a popular cultural group. Marsh and Millard (2000) contend that the term 'culture' is used to 'describe a tangible set of ideas and practices which are exclusive to particular groups of people' (p. 11). The way many participants define manga fans shows the particular qualities of members in this community.

> Wesley: [A fan is] someone who likes manga, and then he likes to read it, and he is always talking about it, or he just talks with his friends and then he meets up with this type of people.
>
> Becky: A manga fan is like, crazy about manga, non-stop talking about it, and always watching the films and reading the books, and collecting manga, toys and stuff like that.

Both students defined a fan's commitment through activities that they would be involved with. It is noticeable that to them, a fan is so full of passion for manga that they are eager to talk about it with others and have ownership over some artefacts related to their favourite stories. The former activity, in particular, shows that fans have the tendency to turn the reception process of meanings in texts into social interaction with other fans (Jenkins 1992).

Elsa further pointed out that a fan's commitment to manga allows them to gain specialised knowledge of the text, and qualifies them to be called by this term. She told me that her own knowledge of manga distinguished herself from the other participants in her group:

> To be a fan, you need to be committed to reading manga a lot, and you'll know a lot about manga. Some of them [other girls in her group] didn't even know what '*shōjo*' was, and like, even I didn't know what '*shōjo*' was [before]. But when you read different pieces [of works], you start to learn a little bit more about *shōjo*, and you'll know what most of the words mean.

Freedman, *et al.* (2013) point out that insiders of a cultural group see knowledge of its particular field as 'a membership card' (p. 110). This membership is earned through accumulated experiences. The response above shows that Elsa prides herself on her specialised knowledge of manga and demonstrates a sense of superiority over those whom she excludes from the fan group.

Similarly, Alistair used 'knowledge' as a criterion to distinguish fans from outsiders:

> If you're a manga fan, you have to know everything about manga. And if you know everything about manga, you're a manga fan.

The students above suggest that the title of 'manga fan' is exclusive to people who have great passion for and specialised knowledge of manga. To them, 'manga fan' is a unique identity that suggests taste and expertise.

However, this identity can induce an ambivalent feeling in fans when facing external opposition. For example, Fiona said:

> Some of my friends actually call me things like manga head [….] Sometimes, well, sometimes I can feel a LITTLE upset about it, but most time, I don't know, I [feel] quite happy. It's like, I have something that people know me for.

The seemingly illegitimate place in society that fans find themselves in can make them both love and hate this identity. Frustrated by the insult about her commitment to manga, Fiona was also proud about the uniqueness of this identity that constructs part of her sense of self.

Similarly, Arthur and Travis mentioned the tension between themselves and friends who do not share the interest in manga:

Arthur: I'm not like open, always talking about manga. No. That will just make me embarrassing.

Travis: I think I'm good at, like, say things at the right time, 'cos with my friends who don't really like manga, I won't talk about it, like this this this this… so they don't have anything to differ [with] me about…. But with friends who do like manga, I'd talk a lot about manga.

Both fans strived to maintain a balance in their social networks by 'concealing' their fan identity when interacting with non-fans. While Wesley and Becky earlier suggest that fans are eager to enunciate their passion in public, Arthur's and Travis' responses show that exclusivity in each cultural group or clique required them to be careful about possible collisions between groups of people that they associated with.

The students above used passion and knowledge as the main criteria to filter fans from non-fans. Whilst their own interest in manga helped them establish a sense of self, they struggled for recognition and acceptance outside the fan community. These struggles continued within the fan community, and became competitions over each other's expertise. In light of Elsa's exclusion of the other girls in her group, I will continue to explore the divisions within a manga fan community.

Social hierarchies in fan communities

Although passion and specialised knowledge bring manga fans together, they also create factions within the fan community. Those that make a great commitment to participating in this particular culture are often the ones being perceived as especially knowledgeable. Brown (2012) argues that comic fans' knowledge and experiences can transform into a form of cultural capital, with which fans compete to gain a status within the fan community. This competition leads to a degree of opposition between elite fans and those with less experience of comics, which is seen in the conversation between some participants about their interaction with friends who were less experienced with manga:

Travis: Sometimes I get frustrated. They all ask you questions like, 'What happen[s] after this?' And then I say, 'That's like two hundred episodes behind from where I am.' And I am like, 'Okay, it just happens.' And then, [they ask] not where this happens, but 'Oh, why did this happen?'

Arthur: Yeah…. That happened to me.

Travis: And I just get angry, 'Let's spoil it!' Like, 'Then this happens, then he kills them, and that happens, and that happens.'

Olaf: And then they ask you, 'Why? Why this happen[s]?'

Arthur: Then you spoil it for them. They cannot like… they don't feel like reading it or something.

Although these students told me that they liked introducing manga to friends and enjoyed talking about manga with friends, they felt irritated when some beginner readers seemed to make no effort to build up their knowledge of manga. The different degrees of passion that these students and their friends showed divided them into sub groups within the fan community.

The students' knowledge of manga determined their status in the hierarchical structure of the fan community. It also affected their practices of fandom. Olaf told me about his experiences of visiting online forums when he was still a beginner reader of manga:

> I used to go to the forum when I was slightly younger. When I [first] got into *Naruto*, I didn't really have the courage to post anything.

Being conscious of his own status (as a beginner), Olaf limited his participation in forum discussions. Fisk (1992) claims that fans' knowledge of a popular culture enhances their power over and participation in the popular text. The students mentioned above showed that the more knowledge of manga they accumulated, the more freedom and power they had in their fandom practices.

However, knowledge does not seem to guarantee respect within the fan community. Alistair's description of *otaku*, a Japanese term that refers to someone who has obsessive interests in manga, shows his judgement regarding this group of people who may be highly knowledgeable about manga but are socially disengaged:

> If he has no life, like, what he does is read manga, he is [an] otaku. He'll be like, wear glasses [....] If he's just like a normal person who likes manga and reads a lot, he's just gonna look like a normal person.

A common stigma presents *otaku* as a person who wears big, thick glasses, and does not care much about their appearance. Alistair self-identified as a fan, but did not look like an *otaku*. The distinction he drew between '*otaku*' and 'normal' people not only suggests that there are various degrees of commitment among fans, but also shows that he intentionally or unintentionally distanced himself from the notorious stereotype of fans as being anti-social and 'having no life'. By doing so, he rejected the convenient generalisation of all fans as the same type of people.

Although the manga knowledge that fans possess and the commitment they make stratifies the fan community into sub-groups, the opposition to the hegemonic culture unites fans as they defend manga against populist criticisms. In the following discussion, I will explore fans' loyalty to manga, drawing on the students' responses to external criticisms of manga.

Fans' defence and rebellion

In addition to consistent commitment to a popular culture text, fans show loyalty in defence of the text. Hills (2002a) points out that fan groups strive to present justifications for their passions toward the particular culture as a way to defend their attachment against external criticisms. I found that participants in this study also tended to justify their interest in manga when their peers or adults showed negative opinions towards it. Harris and Rena said:

Harris: Some people thought like, 'That book is weird, why are you reading it?' [….] I just said, 'It's a book that you read. It's like, it's a normal book. It's not like it's a book for crazy people. It's a book!

Rena: When people say, 'Oh, I hate manga,' you just say 'I love manga!' You just express yourself [….] Sometimes because people just read normal books and they said, 'Oh, I'm reading this book.' But when I'm reading this book [manga], I'm just like, 'Okay, I'm reading this picture,' and people would say, 'Oh why are you reading a childish book? That is just for kids.' And I'll say, 'No, it's not for kids! It's just [that] the drawing is nice!'

During the interviews, the participants often called novels 'normal books' to distinguish them from other forms of texts, including manga, as if novels were the only legitimate reading in their social contexts. However, Harris used this term here not to refer manga to novels, but to defend manga as 'normal' when compared to books in alternative formats. He also explicitly fended off the negative association with fans as crazy people. In contrast, Rena used the same term to refer to novels when she described the negative views about manga from people who only read novels. Rena justified manga against one of the common criticisms that comics were meant for young children or less literate persons due to the picture-dominant narrative. Both of the students showed that they were ready to speak up for manga when encountering criticisms of this text, and that their choice to engage with manga would not yield to peer pressure.

Other common criticisms of manga that the students mentioned include vulgar language, sexually explicit elements and violence. What is interesting is that none of the students thought that these elements could have a bad influence on them, but only on 'others'. Alvin mentioned that there were 'rude pictures'[6] of women in the manga series, *Fairy Tail*, but claimed that they did not have any negative influence on him. Similarly, Abel told me that violence in manga did not make him more inclined to fight, although it might influence the 'younger ones'. He said:

Only to younger people, maybe they want to fight. Um, other people they maybe want to copy Naruto's techniques [….] But I didn't like fight, like, you know, I wasn't influenced by the fighting. I just like their fighting.

Abel tried to clarify that he liked the aesthetic aspects of fighting images rather than real violence. His response seemed to imply that he was mature enough to separate fantasy from reality. Similarly, Zoe and Fiona saw themselves as mature readers who would not be affected by the vulgar language, whilst 'little children' or 'ten-year-olds' would struggle to understand the words. These students did not deny the 'sins' that manga was charged with in populist discourse. However, they tended to position themselves as the unsusceptible ones to defend their attachment to manga. Whilst some students' responses show intolerance of criticisms of manga, others show an instinct to defend manga and themselves in facing the authority that is represented by the adult researcher.

In fact, quite a few students tried to tell me that manga helped them read and learn the English language:

Harris: I thought that if no one wants to read in class, you just give them a manga, 'cos like, at first, I didn't used to want to read books, but then I started reading manga, and I always read books now.

Alistair: Actually, I read most of [sic] manga in English[7] [….] In some other books, it's not really interesting. If I don't know words, I just skip it [sic] , and it doesn't help for me. But

manga, I have to know what it means, so I am not gonna lose the storyline [….] It helps me to continue reading manga, not just skip it.

Elsa: If it's novels, they use too many big words, so you're just getting tired of it, so you just skip the sentences, [but] sometimes you have to read the sentences to understand that word, whilst in manga, they don't use a lot of words, like big words, but if they do, you learn something new. It stands out.

Harris who struggled with reading because of dyslexia found the pleasure of reading in manga. Alistair, who spoke English as a second language, was motivated to learn new English words in manga so as to make sense of the story. Similarly, Elsa, who showed low interest in novels, suggested that the simple structure of sentences used in manga made the text less intimidating and easier for her to pick up new words. These students countered the official culture's criticism of the poor literary quality in comic books to legitimise their taste in manga.

Adults' disapproval of the students' attachment to manga marks it as illegitimate reading. Fiske (1989b) argues that popular cultural text is usually devalued by the hegemonic because its art value is considered as cheap in comparison to fine art and literature. Several students mentioned that their teachers and parents discouraged them from reading manga because it would not help their reading abilities. For example, Olaf described manga as a 'guilty pleasure'. He explained why he used this term:

Most people look down on it [manga] […], So, like, English teachers, they don't say manga is good. Most of them say, 'It's good if you want to read it on your own, but in your spare time. Make sure you get all you need to do first, and then go into manga.'

The English teacher's priority of what Olaf should read classified books of different formats in terms of their literacy value. Therefore, reading manga could induce a sense of guilt in Olaf when his priority was different to his teacher's. However, it could also feel like a rebellious act against the dominant power, which rendered him 'offensive pleasure' from resisting the dominant power (*ibid.*, p58).

Similarly, Hilary mentioned that her English teacher discouraged her reading of manga because it would make her 'level down'. However, Hilary confided that she sometimes hid manga inside a novel to read. Becky also told me that she sometimes read manga late at night to avoid her parents' attention. Aware of adults' disapproval of manga, these students chose to continue their engagement with manga in a covert manner. McDonnell (1994) contends that popular culture may challenge adult authority over children. However, it is this very challenge that turns popular culture into a repository of pleasure and freedom from the forbidden. By choosing to read manga instead of obeying the adults, these students created spaces to negotiate the uneven power distribution between themselves and adults.

The students demonstrated loyalty towards manga when friends, parents, or teachers frowned on their interest in this text. Meanwhile, they tried to justify their interest, despite the awareness that manga reading was considered as non-conformist and had low status with authority figures in their social environments. In the following section, I will continue to investigate the students' passion for manga by looking at their demands for culture-specific elements.

The demands for Japanese elements

The Japanese elements in manga play an essential role in the students' engagement with manga. Travis found the depiction of Japanese life especially interesting:

> It's always like *ramien*, like… village thing [….] It helps you to be reminded that it's set in a Japanese place.

In his individual interview, Travis explained that manga presented a Japanese society that was less culturally and ethnically diverse. To him, the pure, distinct elements of Japanese culture were essential qualities in manga:

> Here [England], it's a mixture of lots of different cultures, but they [Japan] are like, it's simplistic, like, the old culture, being a public Buddhist, go to the temples….

> I like the aspect of villages […] because it's like manga. It's the closest thing to manga. [….] Manga is set in Japanese setting[s], like, mostly Japanese setting[s], and then they've got weapons, swords, ninja[s].

Manga opened up a way for Travis to experience an exotic culture without him having to travel to its country of origin. Manga was not simply a world of make-believe. It exposed him to the culture in a place that existed in reality. According to him, manga had to reflect its Japanese origin:

> I don't think it [vampires] should be associated with manga. I don't think that should be a topic that you should base your manga on. I don't know where vampires came from, but it doesn't really seem like, [fit] in a Japanese thing.

Similarly, the students insisted that the Japanese roots of manga must be retained in the choice of characters' names. Even though they often struggled to remember characters' names correctly, they told me that they preferred characters' names to be phonetically translated from Japanese rather than replaced by English ones:

Abel: It [The Japanese name] makes it unique.

Wesley: Yeah, that's why I like manga, because it has these, these all sorts of names….

Arthur: It's meant to be Japanese.

Travis: It'll be like, 'Oh, Bill! Dude! Do this *Rosengan*[8]!'

Olaf: It wouldn't fit.

Elsa: If she's called Amy, You're just going to be like, 'No, this is not manga!' It's Japanese drawing. You cannot just say....

Rena: 'Cos it has to be linked to Japanese. And if it's [an] English name, it's going to be boring. I'll be like, 'Oh, why is it called Amy?'

Fiske (1989b) points out that fandom is characterised by discrimination. Fans 'draw sharp and intolerant lines between what, or who, they are fans of and what they are not' (p. 147). In other words, fandom is a closed culture that rejects mixing with anything that does not belong to this culture. For the students mentioned above, manga has to retain its Japanese elements to be authentic. They came to manga with expectation of encountering things that were alien to their home culture. Although manga is fundamentally a hybrid text given the historical influence from the West on the creation

of manga (Schodt 1983; Wilson 1999; Gravett 2004; Ito 2008; Bouissou 2010), the local elements seemed to stand out to the students given their exoticism. When I asked the students what elements in manga felt Japanese-specific to them, they mentioned drawing styles (particularly characters' eyes and hair), reading direction, the emphasis of fighting, the depiction of places and lifestyles in Japan, and Japanese language (retention of honorifics, phonetic translation of names, and Japanese words that remain untranslated in the background). In fact, not all of these elements reflect 'Japanese-ness', but the students seemed to interpret anything that is alien to them as a Japanese element. Napier (2001) suggests that it was the 'otherness' of anime rather than its specific 'Japanese-ness' that appealed to Western fans, whereas Fennell, *et al.* (2013) argue that 'Japanese-ness' lies in the origin rather than the presentation, as fans suggested that characters were Japanese whether they looked like real Japanese people or not. It seems that to the students in my study, elements of 'otherness' were regarded as 'Japanese-ness' because of the provenance of manga. To them, any encounter with 'otherness' in manga is an encounter with 'Japanese-ness'. These elements satisfied their expectations of experiencing things that were absent in their lives, and highlighted the cultural experience of manga. At the same time, they legitimised their fan identity as both transcultural and transnational.

Conclusion

The students' involvement in manga fandom shows relationships between fans' passion, knowledge, and social status in the fan community. A manga fan is identified by the degree of their passion, which decides their engagement with the text, and hence the knowledge they obtain. The exclusive nature of the manga fan community gives members a sense of identity. However, the opposition between those who belong and those who do not belong creates tension, which made the students feel both proud and ashamed of being manga fans. Whilst their fan identity marked their uniqueness, they strove to balance their roles in different networks of relationships that collided with each other to some extent. Such conflicts and exclusivity not only existed between fans and non-fans, but also within the fan community. The students placed themselves and others in different status groups according to their commitment to manga and knowledge thereof. Thus, the knowledge that they accumulated about manga became a form of cultural capital that decided the power and freedom they owned over the text. Inwardly, they competed with each other as 'players' (Hills 2002a, 46); outwardly, they acted uniformly to defend manga against external criticisms and to resist the dominant power's control. The students in this study presented a fan society where rivalry and embattled companionship together form bonds between the members.

As a transcultural text, manga provided the students with experiences that were fundamentally exotic, other, and Japanese. These elements were essential to the students' engagement with manga, as they formed part of the students' definitions of manga and validated their fan identity as transcultural and transnational. This study has identified four prominent characteristics of a particular manga fan community, including exclusivity, competitiveness, defensiveness and transculturalism. These aspects highlight the fact that these young British readers' practices in the fandom of manga are not only a form of social practice in which they sought self-identity and power as they interacted with members and non-members of the fan community, but

also a cultural practice through which they gained satisfaction from the experience of what was absent in their local cultures.

Notes

1 This comic convention continues to break its own attendance records with 130,560 attendants at the latest exhibition in October 2015 (MCM-London-Comic-Con 2015).

2 People who dress themselves up as characters from manga or anime stories are called Cosplayers, as a short term for costume players. It has been a culture for many Cosplayers to make costumes by themselves.

3 The data of fans' perspectives in this study is based on two public English-language Internet forums, covering 2006 to 2009.

4 Tutomu (2008) points out that the population of people studying Japanese language overseas increased 83.5 per cent from 1993 to 2006, and contributed the cause to the growing popularity of manga and anime among young people overseas.

5 Manga that are scanned and translated by fans.

6 Female characters are sometimes portrayed voluptuously, wearing revealing clothes in manga marketed at male audiences, such as *shōnen* manga and *seinen* manga.

7 Alistair's first language is Russian. He did not learn to speak English until two years prior to the study. When he read manga online, he read them in Russian. However, he said that he enjoyed reading paper books more than online manga, and all the paper books that he could get in the UK were in English.

8 *Rosengan* is a ninja technique in manga *Naruto*.

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