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New Media Society 2004; 6; 507
DOI: 10.1177/146144804044332

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/4/507
Virtually multicultural: trans-Asian identity and gender in an international fan community of a Japanese star

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Abstract
While recent analyses have helped to challenge commonly-held stereotypes of fans of popular cultural texts as freakish individuals 'without a life', few studies have focused on texts produced and/or consumed outside the United States and Europe. Even fewer have considered the particular significance of the advent of the internet as a tool for intercultural fan activity. This is what this study attempts to accomplish through an ethnographic and textual analysis of an online community of fans of Kimura Takuya – one of the most popular Japanese male celebrities of the moment – dispersed across 14 countries. It explores, in particular, how participants defined their fan, gendered and cultural/global identities through their involvement with each other and with their favorite star, and negotiated as a group the complex process of virtual cross-cultural identity formation.

Key words
culture • gender identity • intercultural • Japanese popular culture • virtual communities
Much has been written about the fan culture that develops around American – and occasionally European – popular cultural texts. Studies of avid followers of *Beauty and the Beast* (Jenkins, 1992), *Star Trek* (Bacon-Smith, 1992), the Beatles (Ehrenreich et al., 1992) or Elvis (Hinerman, 1992), soap operas (Biedly et al., 1999), and *The X-Files* (Scodari and Felder, 2000; Wakefield, 2001) have helped to challenge commonly-held stereotypes of fans as freakish individuals without a life outside of their vicarious involvement with characters such as Spock or Agent Scully. Drawing attention to the complex dynamics of fandom and to fans’ ability to (re)interpret and manipulate their favorite popular cultural texts, scholars have pointed to the pleasurable and even empowering nature of fan activity (Fiske, 1995). As with earlier works on audiences of ‘female’ texts (see, for example, Bobo, 1995; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984), these analyses have exposed also the gendered implications of selective negative characterizations of fan behavior. As Henry Jenkins (1992) notes, sports fans (who tend to be male) enjoy a very different status to media fans (who tend to be female), no matter how ‘demented’ they might be.

However, few analyses have focused on texts produced and/or consumed outside the US. Even fewer have considered the significance of fan culture on an increasingly global scene, fostered in particular by the advent of the internet as a tool for intercultural, and potentially worldwide, fan activity. In focusing on a site about a popular Japanese male celebrity which is maintained by an online community of fans who are largely located outside of Japan, this study explores how participants negotiate their fan, gendered and cultural/global identities through their virtual involvement with each other and their favorite star.

This is an important topic to examine in part because scholars have identified a relatively recent shift in East-Asian geopolitics, which has been prompted by the increasingly dynamic exportation of Japanese popular cultural texts to other Asian markets. As Koichi Iwabuchi notes:

> While the [inter-Asian] flows are becoming bilateral, Japanese popular culture at the moment plays the central role in the flow. Japan as the former colonial power has long been exercising cultural influence on East and South East Asia. It is in the 1990s, however, that Japanese cultural presence became much more conspicuous. (2001b: 200)

This increased Japanese influence on the larger Asian popular cultural scene has been attributed to the ethnic and cultural resonance of Japanese popular culture in these media markets (Craig, 2000; Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995) as well as the ability of Japanese *aidoru* to create pan-Asian identities to which Asian audiences can easily relate (Aoyogi, 2000). Thus, Japanese cultural exports have evolved from ‘culturally odorless’ animated characters to flesh and blood individuals whose attraction rests, at least in part, on their
very ‘Japaneseness’ (Iwabuchi, 2001a, 2002). However, little attention has been given to the way in which fan activity on the internet might contribute to the success of Japanese stars abroad and, in a larger sense, to the development of the pan-Asian identities that they represent.

This process of Japanese influence is also far from devoid of political implications and must be critically examined. Iwabuchi (2001b: 203) reminds us that Japan’s modern national identity is constructed ‘in an asymmetrical totalizing triad between “Asia”, “the West” and “Japan”’. He concludes that the influence of Japanese popular culture in other parts of Asia may be employed by conservative Japanese commentators to locate Japan strategically ‘in and above Asia’ (2001b: 206). In other words, the increased popularity of Japanese popular cultural texts in South Korea, Taiwan or China may serve to subtly reassert Japan’s (culturally) imperialist power in the region. A website dedicated to a popular Japanese star which has been created by individuals from other Asian cultural environments is a possible witness to this complex process of cultural influence.

Finally, because cyberspace has been identified as a domain in which gendered identities are asserted and negotiated constantly (Balsamo, 1995; Clerc, 2000), it is important to consider how gender may be constructed in such a cross-cultural virtual environment.

**FANS ONLINE**

Much research has focused on the role of celebrities in contemporary capitalist societies. Frankfurt School theorists saw stars’ stories of extraordinary success as a central component of the work of hegemonic culture industries serving to reinforce an oppressive status quo (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997; Lowenthal, 1961; Marcuse, 1964). Later theorists developed a more complex picture of celebrities’ relationship to their audience, pointing to the multiple uses that fans may make of cultural artifacts (Marshall, 1997), to the pleasure involved in acts of representation (Beaudrillard, 1983), and to the constant discursive negotiation taking place between stars, fans and media industries (Dyer, 1986, 1998). They also pointed to the role that fans play in supporting cultural narratives of stardom through their consumption of interrelated cultural texts – fan magazines, tabloid newspapers, television appearances – which act to construct and assert individuals’ celebrity status (Marshall, 1997).

In recent years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been identified as a new and significant component of such fan activity. Because of the internet’s potential to eliminate the barriers of time and space, fans who are otherwise isolated from each other can engage in virtual communities, allowing them to negotiate as a group their relationship with their favorite celebrities or characters (Rheingold, 1993). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that participants in online newsgroups, listservs or

These virtual interactions may extend well beyond the boundaries of the geographically-limited communities in which previously, media consumers could evolve (Arjatsalo, 1999). However, the international and intercultural significance of CMC is a much-debated topic. On the one hand, for example, Mark Anderson and Charles Kingsley note that:

The internet . . . promises to be one of the most effective forms of intercultural communication, not only in terms of direct person-to-person communication, but also as a vast resource of multicultural and intercultural information. (1999: 32)

On the other hand, others have warned against an over-optimistic assessment of the communicative potential of a medium disseminating Western values in Western languages (Fukuyama, 1992; Varis, 1999).

Furthermore, few analyses have attempted to analyze specifically how engagement in cross-cultural cybercommunities might influence individuals’ perceptions of their own cultural identities. The significance of online communication in protecting the cultural identity of members of groups who are physically isolated from their original cultural environment is relatively well documented (see for example, Wu, 1999). Unfortunately, the question of the way in which virtual excursions into a different cultural environment are negotiated online remains largely unexplored. Most analyses of online fan groups do note that members come from various parts of the world (Wakefield, 2001), but they stop short of wondering how ‘international visitors’ might experience the community differently from their American counterparts. Even fewer studies have paid attention to the possible intersection of gender and cultural identity in cyberspace.

Certainly, cyberspace has not always been welcoming to women. Cases of online harassment and men’s tendency to dominate, and even take over, discussion lists originated by women are well known (Balsamo, 1995; Herring, 1996). Different gendered online communicative styles have been another issue with which cybercommunities have had to contend. As Susan Clerc (2000: 221) notes: ‘To grossly generalize, men communicate for status, and women communicate to maintain relationships’. Nevertheless, female fans have found ways to produce virtual spaces that are relatively sheltered from hostile male interventions (Vrooman, 2000).

The creation of BBS has been identified as one means by which to avoid male invasion of female cyberspace (Biedly et al., 1999; Clerc, 2000). BBS dialogues differ from chatroom or telephone conversations in that they do not necessarily happen in real time. Participants post messages as they would on the physical version of a board to be read by other members of the
group when they decide to log on. Consequently, participants do not have to ‘think on their feet’, as they would if they were chatting, and are less likely to engage in heated debates (Biedly et al., 1999). Also, BBS can be monitored and contentious messages deleted. Thus, BBS is particularly well suited to the kind of interaction and community-building that female fans are seeking online, and while men may participate in a larger number of online debates through newsgroups or chatrooms, women have been shown to become more intimately involved in fewer, but ongoing, bulletin board discussions (Clerc, 2000).

This was certainly the case for the largely female participants on the three bulletin boards of the website that was analyzed for this study. The women populating the virtual community originally created by Webmaster Maya, and all the fans of the popular Japanese singer and actor Kimura Takuya, were as deeply engaged with each other as with their favorite male star, despite the fact that their cultural origin spanned 14 countries and four continents.

GETTING TO KNOW THE KIMURA TAKUYA FAN COMMUNITY

Before going on to describe this community, however, a word about Kimura Takuya himself seems in order, if only to explain why he might spur such international interest. A member of the all-male band SMAP (Sports and Music Assemble People), Kimura, now in his early 30s, has been one of the most popular Japanese ‘multi-talents’ for about a decade. Aside from frequent CD releases and annual sold-out tours with the rest of SMAP, the celebrity typically stars in several ‘trendy dramas’ a year. Kimura has appeared also on an unprecedented number of commercials. Consequently, he is a household name not only in Japan, but also, increasingly, in other parts of Asia.

Because of his popularity, Kimura has a significant ‘online presence’, with thousands of sites dedicated to him or his band. SMAP also has an official offline fan club, but membership is relatively expensive and difficult to obtain, and the club does not accommodate individuals living outside Japan. While more informal offline communities of Kimura fans also exist, the tight control that Kimura’s powerful manager, Johnny Kitagawa, exercises over the stars that he grooms and their media images might explain the popularity of the internet as a difficult-to-control means of exchanging information and materials. Thus, the site chosen for this analysis is but one element of a much larger virtual and physical fan environment surrounding the star. It is, however, noteworthy for its extensiveness, the frequency of which it is updated, and the number of countries represented in its bulletin boards. Deemed the ‘official English Kimura Takuya site’, it is the site of choice for international fans who cannot read Japanese. The fact that
participants in the bulletin boards were invited to reveal their national identity and/or cultural origin – and typically did in very precise terms⁹ – made the intercultural nature of this virtual community particularly evident.

For this study, the site began to be formally observed in September 2000 and this continued for about 18 months. The author did not participate in the virtual community in any other form than as an informed observer, in order not to influence the flow of discussion. Two of the bulletin boards supported on the site were printed out and a close analysis was conducted of their combined entries, numbering a total of about 1700. While the third bulletin board was read on a regular basis, all of its entries could not be printed out because it is supported by a Japanese server and does not keep an archive. Thus the methodology employed in this study is inspired by both ethnographic approaches, as individuals were being observed interacting virtually in cyberspace, and discourse analysis, as the text that their numerous entries created when considered as a whole was being scrutinized, with an attempt to locate it in its larger context.

It should be noted here that this analysis is significantly affected by the author’s own position as a white, middle-class heterosexual Western European feminist researcher currently living in the US. While the author has lived and conducted fieldwork in Japan for extensive periods of time and has focused most of her research on Japanese popular culture, there is a keen awareness of the concerns associated, at least from a feminist point of view, with such a position. Western feminists have been criticized, in particular, for their essentializing attempts to ‘authentically’ represent non-Western women (see for example, Callaghan, 1995; Ong, 1988; Sawhney, 1995; Valdivia, 1995), and even for using non-Western or minority ‘subjects’ as a means to advance their careers (Chow, 1993). Feminist scholars have also come to recognize the dangers of representing others from a privileged academic position (Alcoff, 1995; Awkward, 1995; Spivak, 1988). With these concerns in mind, the author does not intend here to make generalizations about the numerous cultural environments represented on the site by a relatively small number of individuals. The focus is instead on the relationships developed virtually among these individuals, as well as on their relationship to Kimura and, most generally, to Japanese popular culture.¹⁰

THE WORLD OF ‘KIMURA TAKUYA LIVE’

The site which, in this context, will be called ‘Kimura Takuya Live’ is much more than a collection of bulletin boards. Maintained by a highly-dedicated webmaster, it is an entire universe focusing on the celebrity’s multiple roles in the Japanese popular cultural scene. Thus, unlike most online fan communities of American popular cultural texts, which tend to focus on one show or even one character, the community analyzed here centers around an actual living individual. Considering the nature of Japanese
media, the opposite would be surprising. Indeed, Richard Schickel’s (1985) characterization of celebrities as ‘intimate strangers’ seems particularly well-suited to the Japanese context, in which stars are groomed in a highly intertextual media environment to feel particularly close to their audience, yet extraordinary (for a detailed analysis of this process see Painter, 1996; Stevens and Hosokawa, 2001). The site clearly reflects this approach by providing sub-pages and bulletin boards dedicated to different aspects of Kimura’s work.

An analysis of bulletin board entries identifying participants’ cultural origin\(^\text{11}\) revealed that 39 percent were from Singapore, 24 percent from Hong Kong, 16 percent from Malaysia, 5 percent from the US, 5 percent from Japan and 3.5 percent from Canada. Other countries represented by a few individuals included Australia, China, Indonesia, Korea, New Zealand, Scotland, Taiwan and Thailand. However, these numbers do not do full justice to the make-up of the online community because they do not reflect how involved each respondent was. Board discussions were dominated by a relatively small number of individuals, serving as sources of information and authority figures for a much larger number of fans who rarely posted to the boards but clearly visited the site on a very regular basis. These particularly involved individuals were from Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China. Only one of them was from Japan. The webmaster, clearly the most actively-involved individual on the site (she posted more than 300 times to the boards in the period studied) chose not to reveal her cultural origin, although she was frequently asked to do so. Consequently, her cultural anonymity will be respected here.

Even the fans who did not post as regularly to the bulletin boards might have been vicariously involved in the community by reading the frequent updates in various sections of the site and others’ remarks about their favorite star. Several posters commented that they could not express themselves in English very well, even though they could understand the language when reading, suggesting that the language barrier might have been an issue for some participants. The fact that most fans, even those who popped up in the discussion only once, declared coming to the site ‘every day’ or ‘almost every day’,\(^\text{12}\) points to the possibility that a large number of surfers may be participating silently.

**ENGAGING IN A VIRTUAL MEETING PLACE**

Why would individuals with jobs, families and busy, productive lives want to spend time on the computer reading about someone who they will probably never meet in person? Even a cursory look at the exchanges on the Kimura Takuya Live bulletin boards reveals that visiting the site is not simply about getting information. While the quality of the information provided was frequently mentioned, those posting to the boards mostly spoke of the site
as a special place that they enjoyed visiting. One entry titled ‘A Place Called [Kimura Takuya Live]’ reflected on the importance of the site to fans in a time when their idol was receiving a lot of negative media attention: ‘At times like this, I am glad there is such a place called [Kimura Takuya Live] for us to feel the truth’, the fan wrote. Comments such as: ‘It’s so wonderful to be back here!:)’, ‘Happy to come back here’, ‘Was away for about two weeks and had missed this site terribly’, or ‘Long time, no see’, introducing new entries likened the site to a physical space. Similarly, fans who had been silent observers would occasionally feel the need to make their presence known, as when one of them simply stated, ‘Just like to let you know that I am here’.

After part of the site experienced technical problems and had to be switched to a different server, numerous participants noted how much they had missed visiting it. One fan commented on one of the boards still operating: ‘Now I’m like one arm missing because [the board] is down for so long but never mind, we’ll have fun when it comes back on’. Another summarized much of the community’s feelings with the words: ‘[The bulletin boards] just give me a feeling of “Party Time”, a Party to share our affection on Takuya and his drama’. Or, as a third concluded: ‘I must say that everytime I come by, I leave with a warm feeling’.

The site and its bulletin boards were described frequently as a safe haven that fans entered to escape the dreariness of daily life after a hard day at work – or even when at work, attempting to escape a particularly distasteful task. As one of them explained: ‘This is the freshest place and peaceful place for me to take a break’. Shortly after the dramatic events of 11 September 2001, fans used the site as a refuge and source of support, as illustrated by this comment:

    Perhaps it is selfish and inhuman to thing [sic] about [Kimura] when something like this has happened, but in times of stress, haven’t people always found peace and respite in beauty, music and camaraderie?

The level of enthusiasm on the boards about the webmaster’s work also reveals how pleasurable involvement in the site can be for fans who are starved of information. Frequent messages emphatically thanked her for her updates, translations and hard work. Part of this enjoyment stemmed from the feelings of presence, proximity and connection produced by the webmaster’s detailed descriptions of television drama episodes or media interviews. For example, one fan, commenting on a translation of a television show, noted: ‘I COULD ACTUALLY VISUALIZE THE SCENES WITH YOUR WRITINGS’ (caps in original). Similarly, another wrote: ‘Your translation . . . is very detailed. The whole picture comes out of my mind’.

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But the pleasure also stemmed from the fans’ relationships to each other. Participants in the online community clearly perceived themselves as belonging to a close-knit group. As with members of similar communities observed by other researchers (see for example, Wakefield, 2001), they referred to themselves as ‘we’ and to Kimura as ‘our’. Postings to the board often started with ‘Hi everyone’, ‘Hey SMAP fans’ or ‘Hi pals!’. Shared interest in the celebrity naturally brought participants to the boards closer to each other as they became increasingly involved. As one woman expressed, ‘all people here . . . are real Takuya fans and we think in the same way about him’.

Fans expressed collective pride at the quality of information that they provided, the level of civility of their bulletin board discussions, the number of daily hits that the site received, or the positive reviews from other online sources. Every year, they noted and celebrated the site’s anniversaries, wished each other a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, and reflected on the good times they had had together. As one of them concluded, illustrating the feelings of togetherness occasioned by her virtual involvement in the community: ‘Thanks, all the [Kimura Takuya Live] mates, for all the fun we shared’.

Fans on the site also experienced their relationship with their favorite celebrity as a group. For example, those who were unable to attend concerts might ask for detailed descriptions from those who were lucky enough to go. They dreamed collectively about what Kimura would say if he were to visit the site – clearly a possibility which was constantly on participants’ minds. Successful efforts to get closer to the celebrity on the part of one of them were celebrated by all. For example, when a fan on the board managed to leave a message on his answering machine as part of a survey he was conducting, others responded enthusiastically. As one of them wrote: ‘You are DEFINITELY lucky and I am so happy for you and so happy that one of us in [Kimura Takuya Live] managed to get through’.

As in all communities, however, not everyone on the boards enjoyed a similar status and not everyone automatically enjoyed group membership. Webmaster Maya clearly sat at the top of the group’s hierarchy, enforcing site policies and answering most questions about the celebrity. Very much respected within the community as Kimura’s ‘greatest fan’, Maya enjoyed the admiration of other fans for her knowledge about the star, her ability to keep the site so updated and even her English skills. Her reliability as a webmaster was established through her clear online and offline devotion to Kimura, her ability to obtain reliable information and her firm handling of the site’s policies. She attends all of Kimura’s concerts and has admitted having been ‘in close proximity to him’ on several occasions, even though she has never been introduced to him personally. Most fans treated her like a personal friend, congratulating her on her work and encouraging her to
keep it up, expressing concern about her health when she came down with
the flu, or assuring her that it was fine to delay some of the updates if she
was too busy at work. Numerous members of the community also
communicated with her through private email as well as through the
bulletin boards, especially when they wanted to address a topic deemed
inappropriate for the boards.

Supporting Maya in her endeavor to keep the site updated were a group
of 11 individuals who posted on a very regular basis. While these women
often modestly reminded the rest of the group that they were not nearly as
knowledgeable as Maya about Kimura’s numerous activities, nevertheless
they took the liberty of answering questions in the webmaster’s place when
deemed appropriate – as if, for example, the question came from a fan in
their geographical area. They also contributed to the site by providing
Chinese translations of Kimura’s television dramas, artistic representations of
him in various roles, or their own comments on separate pages.
Occasionally, they even enforced the rules that were established by Maya
and very clearly laid out throughout the site.

The understanding and keeping of site policies forbidding the use of
copyrighted materials and discussion of Kimura’s private life was indeed a
crucial component of group membership which easily differentiated
longstanding members of the community from newcomers. For example,
fans requesting photographs were sternly reprimanded and directed to other
sites or the site policy page. Similarly, those addressing Kimura’s private life
or spreading information that was deemed unreliable were scolded. Even
newcomers who expressed too little understanding of the celebrity’s
character or posted information in the ‘wrong place’ – when discussing the
celebrity’s acting on the bulletin board dedicated to his musical career –
were told to familiarize themselves with the site before posting. Thus,
newcomers could be identified easily through their lack of understanding of
the culture of the community. The following entry by Maya illustrates this
point by locating fans who broke the rules as outsiders:

Those who persist in posting here about photos shown on the net, despite
rules banning it, will be REFUSED ACCESS to our bulletin boards in the
future. If you cannot understand what is stated in the Bulletin Board entry
page, which requests your full agreement with and acceptance of our rules
before visiting our boards, please DO NOT COME HERE. It is obvious that
a website like ours without any photo images is of little use to you anyway.

Comments along these lines appeared repeatedly on the pages of the
bulletin boards as Maya and a few others struggled to enforce site policies.
Less stern reprimands might serve the purpose of more gently socializing
newcomers into the site’s culture and encourage them to join the group.
For instance, one of the 11 most frequent participants wrote:
It is a [Kimura Takuya Live] tradition that we don’t exchange the sources/info on stuff that may violate copyright on any of the boards, and discussion of Takuya’s private life is against [Kimura Takuya Live] policy . . . By complying [sic] with the rules is the way we show our appreciation toward what [Maya] has done, so please join us. Thanks! (emphasis added)

Clearly understanding this dynamic, those fans that had discovered the site recently often referred to the community as ‘you’ rather than ‘we’, until they felt that they had contributed enough to be allowed to include themselves in the group.

Furthermore, those experiencing Maya’s wrath after breaking one of her rules typically responded with much humility and apologizing. Fans who were yet unsure of the rules might even ask for advice or apologize in advance for any trouble they might cause. As one participant put it: ‘I don’t want to do anything wrong here but sometimes I don’t know what’s right or wrong? So if I do anything wrong pls tell me’. Or, as another wrote:

I have review [sic] the rules on BBS, I hope I did not break any rules. If I did, [Maya], please delete my message. I like your web [sic] so much that I do not want to violate any rules that I respect.

Thus, partly due to Maya’s severe enforcement of site policies, the Kimura Takuya Live online community constituted a very civil virtual space where female fans could engage safely in discussions about their favorite man. It was also a space in which strong relationships developed, as involvement in the bulletin boards often led to private email conversations. And when one fan who had lived in Japan for an extended period of time returned to Australia, she decided to donate all the Kimura materials she had accumulated and could not take home to Maya as a token of friendship. Relationships that developed online also occasionally evolved into face-to-face interaction, as when one fan organized a trip to Japan to go to a concert that several members attended, or when participants to the boards in close geographical proximity decided to meet face-to-face. The fact that most participants from Hong Kong and Singapore declared having heard about the site through ‘word of mouth’ also suggests that fans’ interactions extended beyond cyberspace.

Gender in the Kimura Takuya Live community
This virtual community was clearly a gendered one. While the bulletin boards did not require posters to indicate their gender, and while at least one man posted to the board once or twice, the community as a whole perceived itself as female. When generically referring to fans, participants in board discussions used the pronoun ‘she’ and clearly assumed that most people involved were women. One posting reflecting on the relationship between Kimura and the other members of his band read:
For one thing, men relate to one another rather differently from women. They don’t quite exchange details, chatter about shopping conquests, etc, the way we do. (emphasis added)

Many of the topics discussed online were also clearly ‘female’ ones. Long discussions focused on the celebrity’s various hairstyles – one person even took the initiative of conducting a survey of fans’ favorites – his dress, body, skin problems or the way that he treats women. This is not surprising, considering the fact that Kimura’s multiple media appearances – as those of numerous other Japanese males stars – are clearly targeted at a young female audience that is particularly attractive to advertisers because of its high disposable income. The characters he plays on television are carefully constructed to endear him to women not only by highlighting his physical attractiveness, but also by generally portraying him as a sensitive, kind and caring individual (for a detailed description of Kimura’s media persona, see Darling-Wolf, 2003).

Furthermore, while Kimura enjoys a significant gay male, older female and even heterosexual male following, the Japanese media typically portray his fans as a wild group of wide-eyed teenage girls whose admiration rests only in his sex appeal. The celebrity’s popularity among women has served to dismiss him occasionally as a relatively talentless pretty face despite his extreme popularity. In other words, Kimura fans in Japan are subjected to the same kind of stereotypes as female fans in other cultural environments. Their dedication to the star is written off as immaturity.

Clearly aware of these negative stereotypes, members of the community assertively defended themselves against the possible implication that their attraction to the star might only be physical. While certainly a fair amount of discussion focused on his physique, fans liked to emphasize the fact that they admired the celebrity for his talent rather than his looks and enjoyed him as a complex individual that they were collectively attempting to figure out. Participants on the bulletin boards also stressed the fact that Kimura has heterosexual male fans – often including their own boyfriends, husbands or sons – as evidence that his appeal is not only sexual.

Occasionally, female fans specifically acknowledged experiencing first-hand the stereotypes surrounding fan culture. As one of them wrote:

My boyfriend says I am crazy to spend so much money. But then again I think it’s ok as long as I am happy and I can afford [sic] it (Btw, I’m a manager of a company). Friends have commented that I am too old for all this. Sometimes it makes me wonder too. However, it’s great that I can share thoughts and info on this site as no one around me shares the same interests as me.

This posting illustrates the ambiguity stemming from the intense pleasure occasioned by fandom and the assertion of the fan’s right to engage in it and peers’ negative judgement of such behavior. In this case, the bulletin
board was perceived once again as a welcoming place where one could escape criticism. Indeed, a response to this comment dismissed feelings of guilt and reasserted fans’ right to pursue their passion. It read: ‘Sometimes we do need to be a little crazy (life would be more interesting!) as long as we don’t hurt anyone’.

Most frequently, however, stereotypes were addressed by differentiating the online community from other fan groups. This is when the strict rules regarding copyrighted materials, rumor-spreading or discussion of Kimura’s private life most clearly came into play. While most of the other Asian internet sites dedicated to the celebrity did not hesitate to include large amounts of gossip and copyrighted materials in their pages, Kimura Takuya Live’s official refusal to engage in such behavior served to define the community in opposition to these sites as law-abiding and respectful of its idol’s interests. The community’s efforts not to engage in illegal behavior lent the site credibility as an official source of information. Also, strict adhesion to the site’s policy may have been motivated by fans’ awareness of Kimura’s ‘presence’ in cyberspace. In this sense, the prospect of celebrities’ participation in online conversations distinguishes internet fan activity from more traditional manifestations of fandom. Stars’ possible presence in cyberspace may be particularly significant in the case of communities such as the one examined here, which is focused on a real-life individual rather than a show or character.

Indeed, much discussion on the boards focused on what constitutes a ‘true’ fan, and served to hold up members of the community as such. When Kimura and his girlfriend announced that they had secretly married shortly after the press revealed that she was pregnant with his child, members of the community rallied to support his decision, differentiating themselves from fans who criticized his behavior. As one of them concluded: ‘As true fans, we should wish for his every happiness and for the fulfillment of his own dreams!’ (emphasis added). Participants on the board frequently posted scathing critiques of those exhibiting ‘bad’ fan behavior. For example, one woman from Hong Kong wrote:

It’s really sad to know Takuya being bad-mouthed [sic] by ‘fans’. Same here in HongKong [sic], unpleasant messages were posted in Takuya sites. I feel sorry for that!!

Thus, being well aware of society’s negative judgement of fan behavior, members of the community worked hard to define their own behavior in a more positive light. As with consumers of ‘female texts’ observed by other scholars both online and offline (Press, 1991; Radway, 1984; Wakefield, 2001), they were ‘active readers’ resisting the stereotypes used to define them. As a close-knit group, they also gave each other permission to engage
in behavior that was highly pleasurable to them, even if this was frowned upon by larger society.

**Virtually multicultural**

If the Kimura Takuya Live virtual community resembled other female fan groups in many respects, it differed in one significant respect. Its members were physically dispersed around the world. From the habit of talking about live events in ‘Greenwich time’ to the use of several languages, fans’ interactions constantly reflected an acute awareness of the multiple cultural identities that were represented in the pages of the community’s bulletin boards. Postings would often be addressed to ‘all you fans out there in the world’, or conclude with the words ‘wherever in the world you might be’. Mention of various cultural events such as the Chinese New Year or Christmas would be qualified with the recognition that not everyone coming to the site might celebrate these holidays. This international orientation clearly contributed to the site’s attraction. As one newcomer commented: ‘I really like your open-minded international approach, which I prefer to a certain narrow-mindedness that I find in one or two websites.’

However, geography was not erased entirely on the boards and was far from irrelevant to the community. Subgroups of Hong Kong, Singapore or Malaysian fans frequently addressed each other in search of materials, exchanged geographically-specific information, and even met in person occasionally. Furthermore, despite its international nature, the community’s cultural identity was clearly defined as ‘Asian’. The use of Asian keyboard symbols – as, for example, the Asian version of ‘happy faces’ (^o^ or =؛) – or casual mention of Asian popular cultural texts illustrate this common thread among members of the community. However, specific references to cultural identity were erased generally, unless they were deemed relevant to the rest of the group. Chinese languages were not used in bulletin board discussions, even though most members of the community could read them.\(^{13}\) English, deemed an ‘international language’, was the site’s lingua franca.

References to the Japanese popular cultural environment constituted a blatant exception to these rules. Indeed, the community most clearly and definitively defined itself culturally in relationship to Japan. Most fans on the site exhibited an understanding of Japanese popular culture extending beyond their favorite celebrity. They could name other Japanese stars, film directors, television producers and even the celebrities’ managers. They were familiar with Japanese television shows in which their idol did not star and knew Japanese songs that he did not sing. Most of them spoke some Japanese, or at least were studying it. Japanese expressions such as O-isashiburi desu ne! (‘long time no see!’), gambarimashoo (‘let’s keep up the
good work’) or kakkoii (‘cool’) were common on the site, and everyone seemed to assume that everyone else could understand them.

Thus, in many respects, Japanese culture was the common culture uniting all participants in the community across their varied cultural origins, as involvement with Kimura spurred interest in the media environment surrounding him. No matter where they might live, fans on the bulletin boards located themselves as a group in relationship to Japan. For example, members of the community often referred to themselves as ‘overseas fans’ rather than Chinese or even international fans, pointing to the centrality of the Japanese cultural environment to their self-definition of cultural identity. Sometimes the terms ‘foreign’ and ‘abroad’ fans were used also, or simply ‘fans out of Japan’.

The rare Japanese participants on the site were treated as ‘native informants’ reporting on the activities of fans in Japan. Aware of their peculiar status, Japanese fans often differentiated themselves from their compatriots. For example, when Kimura received a lot of negative press after getting married, one of them commented:

As you know most of his Japanese fans, unfortunately including my friends, are quite angry with [his wife] and being bad-mouth [sic] not only to her but also to Takuya. I feel so sad whenever I hear those bad things. But I cannot tell my honest feeling on Japanese BBS.

These insiders provided a crucial direct link to the Japanese cultural environment for fans feeling ‘culturally isolated’ from their favorite star. As one fan from Bangkok wrote in a posting addressed to a Japanese participant: ‘Thank you . . . for making me feel closer to Japan’.

However, feelings of isolation from the Japanese cultural environment were counterbalanced by constant reminders of the ‘Asian’ identity that the fans shared with Kimura and each other. Members of the community enjoyed discussing the celebrity’s popularity in various parts of Asia, announcing with pride his shows’ high ratings in their country or his presence on billboards in the streets of their town. Fans also carefully tracked their idol’s whereabouts and never failed to announce his travels outside Japan.

One particularly discussed event was Kimura’s visit to Hong Kong to shoot a film titled 2046 with director Wong Kar Wai. Numerous fans deemed Wong to be their favorite director and expressed great excitement at the idea that Kimura would be part of a project involving so many Asian stars. They also expressed much concern when the filming stopped indefinitely and Kimura returned to Japan. The star’s Asian identity was celebrated further through more subtle associations. For example, when a Japanese advertising campaign featuring SMAP employed a Hong Kong artist, members of the international community did not fail to notice.
Similarly, when Kimura asked people on the street to write his name in one of his variety shows, fans expressed their disapproval of individuals who did not know one of the characters. As one of them commented: ‘I was actually frustrated with the three ladies who couldn’t write the kanji for the ‘ya’ in Takuya. I’d thought that any overseas fan, who knows Chinese characters, would have written it instantaneously!’ Such remarks served to locate Kimura and his fans in close cultural proximity despite their different national origins.

Thus, while the community virtually extended its geographical reach far outside the boundaries of Asia, its members clearly constructed their own identities as Asian, or at least Asian-identified – as in the case of individuals who were not nationally or racially Asian but were extremely familiar with Asian cultural environments (westerners having lived in Asia or members of the Asian diaspora living in the West.) This virtual ‘Asian-ness’ served as a common bond between women living in cultural environments as different as Thailand, Indonesia, China, the US and Australia, to name but a few, and as a bond between members of the group and the Japanese celebrity, whose Asian identity they also constantly stressed.

But if Japanese popular culture and its ties to the rest of Asia were core components of the cross-national cultural identity that formed in the pages of the site’s bulletin boards, the western world was not entirely absent from fans’ consciousness. In a process illustrative of larger geopolitical power relations (Ivy, 1995), these Asian fans cared very much about their favorite man ‘making it to the West’. For example, much of the discussion surrounding Kimura’s involvement with 2046 focused on the film as a chance for the actor to ‘go global’. As one of them put it:

I think that this film will pave the way for another success for Wong (and Takuya) if the film 2046 can be shown in Cannes Festival next May, especially since the French audiences have become familiarised with Wong’s name and his films. So it will also be easier for Takuya to make a reputation for himself in Europe.

Or, as another explained:

Whether or not 2046 will be the film that introduces Takuya to the West and/or brings prestigious international awards to Takuya, is an unknown. But as I’ve said before, Takuya couldn’t be in better hands. I look forward to see him on a big screen in an art-house type theatre (where Wong Kar-Wai’s films had played before) in Los Angeles. Merely thinking about it is exciting!

Kimura’s extreme popularity in Japan and other parts of Asia was not enough. Defining international success as fame in the western world, fans lamented over his poor English skills – deeming English ‘essential and useful for [Japanese stars’] career[s] if they want to go international’ (emphasis added)
– and used Jackie Chan as an example that Kimura should follow if he was to ‘make it big not only in Japan but to [sic] the world’. The fact that their own following demonstrates that the Japanese celebrity has reached international recognition, even if he may not be well-known in the US or Europe, escaped most of his supporters as they dreamed about him ‘reaching the West’. As one of them put it:

When Takuya reaches the West, he’ll think nothing of his experience with 2046. (I am sure you’ve all noticed I used ‘when’ not ‘if’, huh? I really am a firm believer of Takuya’s destiny as the super movie-star of the world. Can’t wait to see that day!)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Because of its ability to erase the barriers of time and space, CMC offers new and unique opportunities for the creation of cross-cultural encounters. Illustrating this potential, the online community formed by international fans of Kimura Takuya is a multicultural virtual space where cultural origin matters less than devotion to the Japanese star, and where meaningful relationships develop across cultural differences. Through their conversations with each other, the largely female participants on the bulletin boards asserted, defined and negotiated their cultural and gendered identities.

In this respect, their involvement with the community and their favorite celebrity was very similar to that of female media consumers observed by numerous other scholars (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Bobo, 1995; Brundson, 1981; Jenkins, 1992; Lee and Cho, 1990). As with fans of romance novels, soap operas or other varied ‘female’ cultural texts, the women engaged in the community were ‘active readers’ attempting to make sense of the celebrity’s actions, often reinterpreting them to fit their image of him, and occasionally criticizing his behavior. Far from being socially withdrawn, they were women with active lives, prestigious jobs, school, work and often husbands and children to worry about. For most of these women, the online community represented a highly pleasurable ‘safe haven’ that they could always count on when needing a break, a place where friends were supportive and would not question their infatuation with a man mostly known for his looks. Aware of the cultural judgement of fan behavior, they worked collectively to recast their own actions in a more positive light. They also reassured each other of their right to engage in pleasurable media consumption and even in the kind of fantasizing that is generally reserved to male readers of the Sport Illustrated swimsuit issue. In this sense, the Kimura Takuya Live bulletin boards constituted an assuring female virtual space, kept safe by the webmaster’s strict enforcement of a clearly-defined set of rules and supported by everyone in the community.
Also significant was the process of cultural definition taking place in the community as a whole. Despite their varied national origins, the group opted to stress the common Asian cultural identity uniting all participants in the community and their idol. In other words, they virtually constructed around Kimura the kind of pan-Asian communities which scholars have argued are a significant element of the appeal of Japanese popular culture abroad (Aoyogi, 2000; Ching, 1996; Iwabuchi, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). Even online, however, some of the traditional divisions and real-life realities of geopolitical power relations remained. In fact, participants’ relationship to Japanese and western culture was reminiscent of Iwabuchi’s ‘asymmetrical totalizing triad’ (2001b: 203) between Asia, Japan and the West. Japanese popular culture was at the very core of the ‘Asian’ cultural identity, uniting members of the community across national and cultural boundaries. Iwabuchi warns that: ‘Japan’s cultural nationalist project has been reconfigured within a transnational and postcolonial framework, which increasingly capitalizes on the regional cultural resonance in Asia’ (2001b: 210). Kimura may simply be one among a rising number of Asia celebrities that are capitalizing on a positive global redefinition of Asian cultural identity. However, the historical circumstances of Japan’s relationship to the rest of Asia make the reception of Japanese popular cultural texts in other cultural environments particularly complex and potentially problematic.

Furthermore, despite the culturally Asian nature of the bulletin board discussion, ‘the West’ was still relevant to the community. The choice of English as the Asian site’s lingua franca reminds us, for example, of the historically significant power of western cultural environments. This choice was also noteworthy in the Kimura Takuya Live community in terms of class and level of education. The fact that some members admitted suffering from the language barrier imposed by the use of English suggests that fans below a certain level of education might have been excluded from the community. Coupled with the need for internet access, the need to speak English in order to communicate cross-culturally suggests that cross-cultural online communities such as the one examined here are likely to be middle class and relatively highly educated.

Finally, while Kimura’s supporters celebrated his success in all parts of Asia, they were not ready to accord him global or international status until he had ‘made it to the West’. As they dreamed about a time when he would be recognized in the streets of Los Angeles or Paris, and scolded him for not practicing his English enough, they revealed how much importance they placed on success in the environments still dominating the international cultural scene. Noting the numerous times that Kimura had been seen with Western stars visiting Japan, they deplored the fact that the admiration could not be reciprocal. As members of a ‘minority’ within the larger cultural
order, they were still longing for representation and acceptance in the global mainstream still vastly dominated by western faces.

Notes
1 Notable exceptions to this oversight include Minu Lee and Chong Heup Cho’s (1990) analysis of Korean soap operas and Radhika Parameswaran’s (1999) work on romance novels in India.
2 Japanese term for ‘idol’: used to refer to popular media celebrities typically involved in multiple areas of the entertainment industry.
3 As noted, most studies of online fan communities focus on popular cultural texts originating in the American cultural environment.
4 All online pseudonyms have been changed to protect participants’ anonymity.
5 Japanese names are given in the Japanese traditional order of family name followed by given name.
6 Popular television dramas with a developing story running for about 12 weeks. Borrowing from multiple genres – anywhere from soap operas to police dramas – Japanese trendy dramas are a popular cultural form with no true equivalent in the West.
7 In the blatantly commercial Japanese media environment, the success of celebrities is often measured by the number of commercials they appear in each year.
8 Kitagawa, who manages most of Japan’s favorite male idols, holds both stars and fans in a very tight grip. Concert photographs and paraphernalia can only be bought at official Johnny stores, and concert tickets can only be obtained officially by joining the fan club and entering a lottery to determine who will get to attend. Johnny also holds the copyright to all his stars’ media appearances.
9 Visitors to the site were typically very precise in their identification of cultural origin and national identity. They would generally note if they lived in a cultural environment different from their original one – as in ‘Korean living in New York’. The author believes that the numerous entries including such qualifications allow one to conclude with a fair amount of certainty that the vast majority of fans participating in the community were indeed ‘international fans’ and not Japanese nationals living outside Japan, or second- or third-generation Japanese immigrants to other cultural environments.
10 In order to protect participants’ anonymity, no fan is quoted more than once or twice in the following pages, and actual names, online ‘handles’, or pseudonyms are never used. Quotes are also transcribed exactly as they appeared on the site, including spelling and grammatical errors and typos.
11 The general bulletin board allows visitors to identify where they are from; the other two bulletin boards did not include such a category until recently. Overall, 172 individuals chose to identify their cultural origin out of 278 who posted to the three bulletin boards.
12 Each entry on the general bulletin board asks posters to reveal their name, email, where they are from, how they heard about the site and how often they visit it.
13 Chinese translations of television dramas were included as links.
14 The film was to star celebrities from Hong Kong and Thailand in addition to Kimura.

References


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