

**‘When They Quit from the Stage, I Quit from Learning’:
Japanese Idol Fandom and Japanese Language Learning**

Jinyue Xu

Department of Asian Languages and Literature, University of Washington

March 9, 2022

Abstract

While anime is well-recognized as a significant motivator of Japanese language learners today, idol fandom, though served as an equally strong source of motivation for some learners, receives far less academic attention. This paper is a preliminary exploration of idol fandom's role in fueling the Japanese language-learning process. Through conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with two Japanese language learners who also identified as fans of ARASHI—one of the most popular idol groups in the Japanese entertainment industry—the author revealed that fandom (1) efficiently facilitated the learners' language-learning motivation along with a risk of demotivating them when a crisis occurred to the idols' career, (2) encouraged the learners to participate in creative language plays after they observed their idols' linguistic performance, and (3) allowed them to expand their social networking by exploiting their fandom as topics of conversation. As a language-learning motivator, idol fandom's dependence on external factors (e.g., the idols' activeness) makes it relatively unreliable, yet it gives learners agency in producing utterances in the target language when they look up to and imitate the native speaker idols.

Introduction

While Gardner's (1983) traditional socio-educational model divides language learning motivation into two types—integrative motivation aiming to join a cultural group and instrumental motivation aiming to employ the language for a particular goal—motivation of Japanese learners today goes beyond the dichotomy. Interest in Japanese popular culture becomes a new significant motivator, which cannot be classified into either of Gardner's categories. Today's learners are often consumers and fans of Japanese popular cultural products at first, and the fandom initiates and sustains their motivation throughout the language-learning journey.

Current studies on Japanese learning motivation usually use the term “Japanese popular culture” interchangeably with “anime.” Although anime is undoubtedly a major component of Japanese popular culture, it is not all of it. Another important element is Japanese idol culture. The fandom of Japanese idols serves as an equally strong motivator for some Japanese learners, but it is far more academically underexplored than anime. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the role of Japanese idol fandom in learners' Japanese learning process. Selecting one of the most famous Japanese idol groups ARASHI as a representation, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with two fans regarding their experiences both as fans and as Japanese learners. Results reveal that fandom has facilitated their motivation, involvement in language plays, and construction of social networking.

Previous Research

Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self theory argues that language learners are mainly driven by three sources of motivation, namely the Ideal Self, the Ought-to Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. In addition to the enjoyment they received from the immediate learning environment and experience, learners are expected to incorporate their competence in L2 into their identity somehow to better motivate the learning—in other words, to establish a L2 self-image independent from their L1 identity that they want to become and/or should become in the future. In this study, the participants' L2 selves root in their fan status: their identity as Japanese learners derives from the fact that they are fans of the Japanese idol group in the first place, and the fan self-identification in turn motivates them to learn Japanese in order to become a better fan.

While there are rich studies on anime as the motivator of Japanese language learners (e.g. Fukunaga, 2006; Fung, Pun, and Mori, 2019), idol culture is not regarded as a significant motivator and thus hardly attracts academic attention. On the other hand, fandom studies rarely stretch to the domain of SLA research. In Crow's (2019) and Darling-Wolf's (2004) research on international pop culture fan communities, fans' use of foreign languages (Korean in K-pop fandom and Japanese in J-pop) plays a role in establishing the community boundary and maintaining certain norms, but how fandom facilitates individual fans' foreign language learning is undiscussed. An unexplored academic area of the relationship between idol fandom and language learning is revealed, and this paper aims to have a preliminary

exploration on this topic by studying fandom of a Japanese idol group and its influence on two fans' Japanese learning process.

Methodology

This research is based on two semi-structured in-depth interviews with two participants recruited through convenience sampling. The recorded interviews lasted for 1 hour and 1.5 hours respectively. Since the two participants are native Chinese speakers, both interviews were conducted in Chinese and were later converted into detailed notes in English for qualitative analysis.

Participants

The participants Gloria and Tia (pseudonyms assigned by the author) are both Chinese international students who graduated from a liberal arts college in the United States last year. They began to take Japanese classes from 100-level since their freshmen year and both reached an advanced level by the time they graduated: Gloria finished all the 300-level classes and passed N2 level of Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT thereafter) eventually, while Tia passed N3 level and then went to Japan for a year-long study abroad program during her junior year. Neither of them was a Japanese major; Gloria majored in Psychology and Tia in Sociology, but they both had Japanese as an additional minor.

Analysis

Motivation

Gloria and Tia's idol ARASHI was one of the most famous male Japanese idol groups in Japan. Debuted in 1999, the group had been active for over twenty years in various areas, including singing and dancing, starring in films and dramas, hosting entertainment shows, and participating in commercial endorsements. In their peak period from 2008 to 2018, they were praised as the "national-level (*kokumin-teki*) idol group." On January 27, 2019, ARASHI suddenly announced that they planned to terminate group activities in two years, which caused a sensation among fans and in Japanese society. By the last day of 2020, the group officially terminated all the group activities.

Gloria and Tia's fandom concentrated on the last few years of the group's active period. When they went to college around 2017 and gradually adopted their fandom, ARASHI was at the peak of their career. As Gloria and Tia began to learn Japanese in college, their consumption of ARASHI-related programs companioned them throughout their language learning journey. Their fandom and Japanese learning formed a virtuous cycle through mutual facilitation: watching shows in Japanese inspired them to learn Japanese better, and the Japanese knowledge learned in class allowed them to better watch the shows. Yet due to this high reliance of motivation on their idols, ARASHI's decision on the termination of group activities led to a great impact on their Japanese-learning impetus.

After talking about her shocking and upset feelings on the day of the announcement, Tia described how her motivation decreased after that. Originally, she applied for the study abroad program because she learned a lot about Japanese culture through ARASHI's shows, which made her want to go to Japan and observe the culture through her own eyes, but the time when she actually went to Japan was after the termination announcement, which made her much less excited for the study abroad experience than she used to be. During the time, she did not watch as many shows as she did every day before anymore, and her enthusiasm in learning Japanese also decreased correspondingly, "their (ARASHI's) proportion in my life was getting smaller and smaller, and my interest in Japanese was also lesser and lesser." After she finished the study abroad program and went back to China, she stopped learning Japanese completely.

Gloria's passion for ARASHI lasted longer than Tia's but also gradually faded out as ARASHI faded out from the stage. She kept consuming ARASHI's shows after the announcement because she wanted to treasure the last two years of the group. Nevertheless, there was a prominent shift in her source of Japanese-learning motivation, revealed from her contrasting experiences taking JLPT twice that were three years apart. The first test occurred before the announcement, and the second was after the group's official termination. Gloria first took N2 in her junior year merely because she wanted to test her Japanese skills—she did not want to use her Japanese instrumentally at all. She was confident in doing well on the test, especially on the listening section, as she constantly consumed TV shows in Japanese and was also taking advanced-level Japanese classes then. As a result, she successfully passed N2. Three years later, as she got a boyfriend who was also a Japanese learner and was planning to work in Japan in the future, Gloria began to consider the possibility of moving to Japan together with him, and therefore she challenged herself to take N1 this time. Yet because she did not take this prospect seriously, and plus she did not feel motivated to learn Japanese after ARASHI's termination, she failed the N1 test.

Both Tia and Gloria experienced a decrease in motivation in learning Japanese after their idols' retirement. This was not an instantaneous transformation but a gradual process of losing interest and passion. While ARASHI provided them with strong motivation in learning Japanese in the first half of their fan career, the group also took their learning enthusiasm away as they stepped down the stage. Noticeably, the parabolic curve of Tia and Gloria's learning motivation formed a parallel with ARASHI's career trajectory.

Language Plays

Consuming Japanese TV shows not only improved Gloria and Tia's Japanese skills in general but also allowed them to participate in language plays on the basis. Gloria and Tia both mentioned a TV drama starring one of the members of ARASHI, Matsumoto Jun. The drama *99.9 Criminal Lawyer* involved a lot of Japanese puns in the lines, which Gloria and Tia found fascinating to learn about. Gloria revealed that when she watched the first season, she was frustrated that she was unable to understand all the jokes, so she studied each pun to

learn why it was supposed to be funny. When she got to Season 2, she could gradually catch most puns without external help, and this improvement made her excited and self-satisfied. Her recognition of the puns such as *かんばんは* (term “signboard” *かんばん* + greeting phrase *こんばんは*) and *いただきマンガース* (phrase *いただきます* + animal “mongoose” *マンガース*) endowed her with a sense of humor in Japanese.

Given that Gloria and Tia were both trilingual speakers (Chinese L1, English L2, and Japanese L3), they demonstrated competence in participating in cross-lingual language plays that involved all three languages they spoke. For example, Gloria introduced a funny translation of a lyric in one of ARASHI’s songs. A line in English “turning up with the J-pop” was translated into “*riben liuxingyue haifantian* (‘Japanese pop music gets high in turning up’)” in Chinese, which was a literal yet unfashionable translation. Gloria did not find other lyric translations funny, possibly because this was a rare case in which an English line was used in a J-pop song and was further translated into Chinese. Gloria was able to realize the double translation process only because she was proficient in all three languages, which allowed her to recognize the strangeness of verbatim translations.

Most of Gloria and Tia’s interlanguage language play produced during the interviews involved a mixture of Chinese and Japanese. Gloria once used the phrase “*nachu benqi lai* (take out my *honki*),” which was a very literal translation of the Japanese phrase *本気を出す*. Tia, on the other hand, shared some Chinese-Japanese memes with me (as shown in Figure 1). Characters in red were adjectives in Japanese, followed by Chinese particles in white font. These playful uses of pidgin during the interviews marked a transformation of their roles in language plays: they went beyond the status as passive perceives of the language play performances and became active (re)producers.

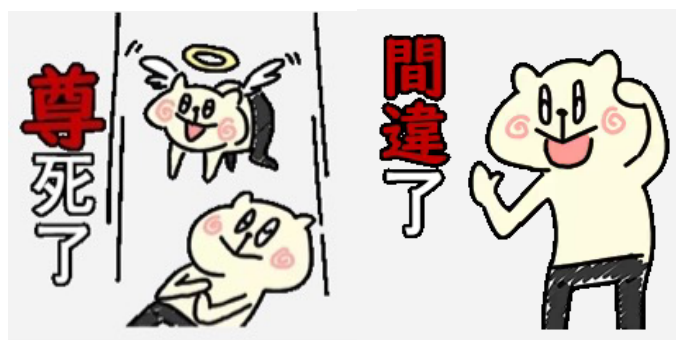


Figure 1. Memes used by Tia

Social Networking

By labeling themselves as fans of ARASHI, Gloria and Tia established their Japanese-related friend circles. All their friends had some knowledge of Japanese popular culture, and many of them were also Japanese learners who took classes with Gloria and Tia together. Gloria introduced how she expanded this friend circle through her fan identity:

It was not because of ARASHI that we became friends; it was more like a ‘compound

variable': when you get into the Japanese-learning environment, you will meet people who are either anime fans or fans of the real-person entertainment circle. It's impossible for those who like Japanese celebrities to not know about ARASHI. That was how we developed a friendship.

According to Gloria, her idols became a common topic between her friends and her, and by regarding her peer learners as friends with whom she can share her passion, she was even more motivated to take Japanese classes.

Before Tia left for the study abroad program in Japan, she, like Gloria, also had a close friend circle established through her fandom. She became friends with two other ARASHI fans in her Japanese class, and the three of them formed an amateur "ARASHI fan club" that sometimes met after class, and the "members" would watch ARASHI's shows together. This "fan club" also served as a Japanese study group as they usually practiced Japanese together. After Tia went to study abroad, her fan identity further benefited her in making friends with local native Japanese students. Since ARASHI was very famous in Japan, Tia's fandom was a great opening topic for conversations with Japanese young people, which allowed her to make many more Japanese friends compared to other study abroad students.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper explores the role of Japanese idol fandom in Japanese learners' language learning journey. The qualitative data analysis shows that the learners' fandom functioned as a conditional motivator—when the idols were active in the entertainment industry, these learners were passionate for their idols and felt motivated to learn Japanese, but their motivation dropped gradually along with their idols' retirement from the screen. Second, the learners' consumption of TV programs related to their idols cultivated their sense of humor in L2 through language plays. The learners were first observers of language play performances and gradually became innovative producers themselves. In addition, the fandom also helped them establish their personal Japanese-learning networks. As they regarded their classmates as potential peer fans, they became more motivated to learn Japanese and further expand their communities by meeting new learners in the environment.

Although the environmental factor of being fans in the United States is not discussed in this research, it deserves further exploration. Gloria and Tia both mentioned that it was hard for them to be fans of their idols in China. Fans in China were expected to prove their love and fandom by spending a lot of money for their idols, but neither Gloria nor Tia wanted to conform to this subcultural norm. It was only when they came to the States for college and were away from the fan culture in China that they dared to identify with their fan status. In the U.S., their fandom was beneficial in language learning, but in China, it was only financially burdensome for them. Further studies may investigate how different social and (sub)cultural contexts influence idol fandom and language learning.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Becoming a fan

- Tell me about your idol
- What was the first time you knew about [I’s idol]?
 - ✓ How did you learn about them?
 - ✓ What did you think of them at first impression?
 - ✓ What was your stage in learning Japanese at that time?
- When was the time you became a fan?
 - ✓ How did the transfer happen?
 - ✓ What was the trigger? Any impressive scene/episode?

Consumption of Idol-related Programs/Products

- For [I’s idol], what have you consumed?
 - ✓ songs, concerts, dramas, films, バラエティ番組, etc.
 - ✓ How did you watch those programs? (Ex. platforms, with(out) subtitles, translation)
- Have you been to Japan? What was it like going to Japan as a fan?
 - ✓ Did you buy any related products?
- What knowledge of Japanese and/or Japan have you learned in these experiences?
 - ✓ Examples of a specific grammar point, vocabulary, cultural phenomenon?

Fandom & Learning Japanese

- How did you decide to learn Japanese at first? What were your initial goals?
- How did you learn Japanese?
 - ✓ Academic: classes, language table, etc.
 - ✓ Outside of class: self-learning?
 - ✓ Any JLPT experience?
- Did becoming a fan have any influence on your motivation of learning Japanese? How so?
 - ✓ Any other changes in motivation throughout the learning journey?
 - ✧ If ARASHI: please walk me through the day when they announced the termination of group activity
- “Then-now” self-evaluation: how much did your Japanese improve before/after becoming a fan?
 - ✓ How did the materials you consumed for your idol help your Japanese improvement?

Relationships with Other Fans

- Do you know any other fans? How did you know them/know that they were also fans?
 - ✓ Did you make any friends with other fans through online platforms/communities?
- What were your relationships with them?
- What would you do when you were together? What would you talk about?
- Were they also learning Japanese? If so, how would you learn together?
- How were these relationships meaningful to you?