Construction and Production of Urban Otaku Cultural Spaces—The Case of Akihabara Japan

Fan Jichen

University of Greenwich, London, SE10 9LS, United Kingdom
fjc364860177@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper aims to invoke the theory of the production of space to explore the formation and development of otaku cultural spaces in the Akihabara area of Tokyo. Firstly the historical development of Akihabara and the definition of otaku are reorganised under a literature study. Secondly, Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of space production serves as the analytical framework that explains the logic of Akihabara's constitution as an otaku cultural space in the physical, mental and social realms. Akihabara's geographical location, architectural form and infrastructure provided the material basis for its development as a gathering place for otaku culture. Japan's unique social dynamics foster a fluid interplay between the virtual and the real, enhancing the sociality of the space. The pervasive presence of ACG (anime, comics, and games) elements fulfills the area with distinct symbols and meanings, generating a sense of spiritual belonging among otaku. These three dimensions—physical, social, and spiritual—interact in a cyclical structure, continually influencing and reinforcing one another. Finally, the approaches in which various forces of power, capital and citizen life in space reproduction reshape space are revealed through Akihabara. This research offers a new perspective on the production and reproduction of urban cultural spaces and provides valuable insights for examining other urban cultural phenomena.

1. Introduction

In Japan, otaku constitute a distinct social group that has emerged in connection with the rapid development of Anime, Comics, and Games (ACG) culture and modern information technologies. Scholars both domestically and internationally have extensively explored this cultural phenomenon, focusing primarily on three key aspects: the historical evolution of otaku culture, the psychoanalytic study of the otaku community, and the analysis of otaku symbols (Azuma, 2012; Otsuka, 2015)[7,18]. However, there has been relatively limited analysis from culture space perspectives. As a popular culture, the inception, development, and evolution of this culture are intimately linked to urban. Examining otaku culture offers insights into the impacts of culture on the diverse social connotations, ideologies, and political practices inherent within urban spaces.

Grounded in relationships between Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (1991)[1], the generation of Akihabara and the characteristics of otaku culture, this study indicates how culture space is produced and reproduced, as well as its function and significance within the urban context.

This approach not only deepens the understanding of Lefebvre's theory on the urban scale but also highlights the complexity and diversity inherent in the interactions between otaku culture and urban space. Additionally, it offers the possibility of space study in applying to different scenarios of culture. Utilizing Lefebvre's theory of spatial production as the analytical framework, this paper employs qualitative research methods combined with literature analysis. Firstly it explores the definition of otaku and the historical evolution of the Akihabara area. And then it examines the operational mechanisms of otaku cultural space in Akihabara. Finally, it reveals the shifts in power and urban remodeling processes involved in the production of this unique cultural space.

2. Otaku Definition

The beginnings of otaku can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s, but their definition is distinctly contemporary. The growth of otaku is closely related to external factors such as Japan's shifting economic and social landscape, the evolution of the ACG industry, and advancements in technology, as well as to the internal attributes including the perceived appearance and research passion for certain genres. Despite temporal and spatial differences, current otaku shares both distinct and common characteristics with their predecessors.

The definition of otaku has been approached from two main perspectives: firstly, as individuals who have withdrawn from real-life social interactions, and secondly, as "specialists in a certain culture" (Aida, 2005)[2]. In the 1980s, Nakamori (1989) formally introduced the term 'otaku' based on their peculiar appearances and enthusiasm for certain activities[3], while Asaba (1989) characterized otaku as an unsocialized group struggling to form identities outside the otaku realm[4]. Nakajima (1991) proposed the 'communication deficiency syndrome', suggesting that otaku perceive only those within their common interests as real, thereby explaining their disengagement from real life and their tendency to reconstruct their identities in virtual worlds[5]. Miyadai (1994) acknowledged the lacking of social etiquette by otaku, but emphasized their intense passion for specific fields, coining the term 'unbalanced specialist'[6]. Okada (1996) further emphasizes the links between otaku and ACG works, arguing that:

'People who have a strong ability to adapt to the information exploration age and to do relevant studies and researches by collecting huge amounts of rapidly-updating information; who are very sensitive to the visual and textual information and have the ability to analyze and criticize what the author is trying to say in their work; and who possess perseverance, always ready to improve oneself and has the desire to show his collections and knowledge[7].'

This paper develops previous research to identify otaku as a group characterized not merely by their enthusiasm for ACG, but by their establishment of novel modes of interpersonal interaction through interests. They are driven by a profound passion and fixation within the ACG domain, actively contributing to the vitality and regeneration of this culture through their creative endeavors, consumption practices, and collection activities. The definition of this community enables a better understanding of the intimate and complex connections between them and the surroundings in the production of space.

3. Akihabara Development

The contemporary geographical conception of Akihabara encompasses numerous business areas within a main street and several adjacent blocks, situated to the west of Akihabara Station. This district follows a historical line of commercial transformation from electrical appliances, home appliances, and computers to a diverse marketplace for otaku peripherals and various electronic products. After the Meiji Restoration, Akihabara saw the emergence of wholesale shops dealing in electric wires, distributors, switches, and radio devices, laying the foundation for the Akihabara

Electrical Appliances Sales District. After the Second World War, as the Japanese economy rebounded, a large number of electrical appliance shops opened in Akihabara, specializing in radios and other components like vacuum tubes. From the 1950s to the 1970s, these shops diversified their offerings with imported and domestically produced household appliances such as washing machines, televisions and refrigerators, as well as home entertainment equipment like video cassette recorders and video game consoles. In the early 1980s, Akihabara developed steadily and rapidly with a surge in the construction of high-rise commercial buildings, shaping the contemporary layout of its commercial districts. In the 1990s, along with the rise of the Internet industry and technological advances, a vast array of computer products appeared in Akihabara (Satoru, 2008; Zhuona-Borijihan, 2014)[8,9].

4. Space construction of otaku culture

In contrast to previous space studies, Lefebvre's (1991) theory of space production emphasizes that spatial analysis should integrate the physical, mental, and social realms into a unified framework. Adopting this theoretical perspective, this section investigates the spatial construction of otaku culture in Akihabara through the interplay of these three domains. By examining the mechanisms underlying this spatial construction, a better understanding is generated within the underscoring of the ontological nature of space and elucidating the fundamental logic of operation.

5. Physical realm

Firstly, space in the sense of physical focuses on the specific composition, realistic structure, and function. This includes the roles of land-use categories, architectural forms, spatial configurations, and related infrastructures, which collectively provide places, trigger perceptions, facilitate communication, and guide human behavior (Zhong, 2022)[10]. Since the Edo period, urban land in Japan has been organized into square grids of approximately $200m^2$, with Japanese residences situated within these grids. Since land in Japan is privately owned and the government does not have the right to expropriate it without the consent of the landowner, the city texture of Japan's urban land has changed restrictedly since ancient times (Liu, 2012)[11]. This limited volume has led to a dense urban fabric, particularly in Akihabara, where buildings in each grid are in close proximity along either side of the main streets to meet modern demands and ensure efficient land occupation. This contributed to the commercial hub for computers and electronics in this area evolved into a highly concentrated situation during the late 1990s. With computers serving as the primary medium for the production and dissemination of ACG contents, it was inevitable that otaku, seeking these tools, would frequent Akihabara more often. This heightened foot traffic, in turn, fosters the growth of otaku peripheral industries within the area. Additionally, this architectural structure creates Akihabara's unique space arrangements of a similarity to "Disneyland", where organized by specific interests in a vertical approach instead—such as male and female-oriented peripherals, assembled models, or all-in-one stripped models—within a cohesive thematic framework.

In addition to the historical urban fabric, site-specific architectural forms, and commercial models dominated by electronic computers, the functional transformation of public space established the essential physical foundation for Akihabara to become the world's largest concentration area of anime and manga-derived products. Since 1973, the main street in the center of the Akihabara district has been partially closed on Sundays to create a 'pedestrian paradise' (hokosha tengoku). This arrangement unintentionally offers a platform for otaku to engage in performance, often dressing in costumes representing their favorite ACG characters and taking to the streets to sing, dance, or mimic scenes from digital media. This festive atmosphere resembles

that of a traditional matsuri (Galbraith, 2018)[12]. Urban planning and street layouts have provided substantial support for the development of cultural spaces and created an ideal environment for a wide variety of otaku activities and creations. The integration of body and performance into the physical realm of the space, both establishes the foundation of spatial perception and emotional sharing, allowing individuals to express themselves culturally as creators within the space of representation. Akihabara's environment provides a physical foundation for the construction of mental and social realms, furthermore facilitating frequent offline social interactions among otaku and solidifying the area as a locus of cultural identity.

6. Mental realm

The mental aspects of space originate from the subject's imaginative engagement and identification establishments within the space. Since the otaku's inception, there exists a degree of antagonism between mainstream culture and the otaku community. The general public often holds misunderstanding and skepticism regarding to otaku lifestyle (Saroru, 2008)[8], and individual incidents have led to the prejudgment of the whole community as dangerous (Galbraith, P. W, Kam, T. H & Kamm, B, 2015)[13]. Consequently, otaku are marginalized by society, with mainstream culture attempting to isolate them both in terms of their daily lives and cultural expressions.

In Akihabara, however, the situation is markedly different. The platforms of Akihabara Station are adorned with giant advertisements featuring beautiful girls, while oversized LCD screens display the latest anime and game promotions. Costumed cosplayers distribute free promotional items on the streets, and ACG-themed restaurants and cafes are easily accessed. These various signs, symbols, texts, and meanings created by otaku through their everyday practices may appear incomprehensible to outsiders but are considered normal landscapes in Akihabara (Zhuona-Borijihan, 2014)[14]. These symbols not only appeal to the target community but also reinforce Akihabara's symbolic status as a center of otaku culture. Morikawa (2003) observed that large-scale advertisements featuring cartoon images frequently adorn the façades of buildings in Akihabara[15], obscuring the glass curtain walls and disrupting the visual connection between the indoors and outdoors. This spatial materiality fosters a more secluded and private inward-looking environment, where it is difficult for outsiders to identify the types of goods sold inside and naturally, who is stepping inside. This arrangement creates a tacit understanding among those within the same circle of interest, fostering a sense of collective belonging and identity in Akihabara by filtering out others. When otaku transition from the cyber environment to Akihabara, they encounter the virtual world experience in a tangible setting, finding acceptance in the familiar and beloved symbols ubiquitous throughout the area. This immersion in a physical space rich with cultural symbols further solidifies the otaku's cultural identity and spiritual affiliation, reinforcing their sense of community and belonging.

7. Social realm

Space, as a production of human practice, is a synthesis of social relations and meanings (Lin, 2015)[16]. The prerequisite for the generation of a space lies in the shifting of the social realm. Japanese society experienced significant upheaval in the 1990s, marked by the Osaka-Kobe earthquake, the Tokyo underground sarin gas incident, and the bursting of the economic bubble. These events profoundly redefined the relationship between individuals and society. The inadequate governmental response engendered a severe crisis of confidence in Japan's political, cultural, and economic systems. This disillusionment made it increasingly challenging for individuals to maintain a coherent sense of reality within society, compelling them to retreat into smaller, self-managed circles and seek personal meaning in their lives (Uno, 2015)[17]. The conventional normative value

systems of society are functionally ineffective and otaku are forced to create an alternative set of values, in other words, choosing the useful and valuable side for interpersonal relationships when confronted with value norms between the reality and digital realms (Azuma, 2012)[18]. The social phenomenon of otaku that emerged in the late 1990s reflects this change. Compared to engagement in reality, otaku devoted significant time and energy to the collection and analysis of virtual materials of ACG. Gradually, the modes of communication and habitual behaviors derived from the digital world became the standards by which otaku judged and interacted with others. Wang and Wang (2009) posit that communication within the otaku community operates as a system of encoding and decoding rules[19]. They reproduce ACG as derivative works productions in the virtual realm. The recipients of these works must decode the creator's expressions to bridge a mutual communication. Thus, the ability to encode and decode these cultural texts has emerged as a novel social criterion within the otaku community.

New social standards generate new needs, and Akihabara facilitates their fulfillment by enabling these interactions from online to offline. Derivative works often rely on physical media, such as paper-based self-publication and cosplaying as ACG characters. For the purposes of display, sharing, and communication, otaku engages in various forms of offline discussions. Proficiency in encoding and decoding systems is crucial for verifying each other's identities. Once verification is achieved, online social relationships are transposed into the physical realm, leading to the establishment of new social venues such as derivative works societies and anime conventions.

There exists a dynamic feedback loop between the realms of the physical, mental, and social. The physical aspect exerts an influence on social behavior and cultural symbolism, which, in turn, reinvents and redefines the physical. Ushigaki (2012) examined the evolution of commercial areas in Akihabara from 2000 to 2006, highlighting a significant increase of 60% in the number of otaku peripheral shops, most of which are concentrated along the main street[20]. This cyclical interaction not only fosters the consistent development and evolution of Akihabara as a mecca for otaku culture but also establishes a distinctive lived space that is both culturally and socially significant for the otaku community. Within this process, the three domains operate synergistically. The space functions not merely as a backdrop for cultural and social behaviors, but also as an active participant and creator, thereby generating a unique cultural ecosystem through continuous interaction and feedback.

8. Space production of multiple forces

Modern urban space has undergone continuous remodeling under the influence of multiple forces, including capital, power, and citizen life. The production of urban public space, to a significant extent, involves the production and reinforcement of dominant power structures. This process needs to be examined based on an analysis of the triple logic framework of power, capital, and life (Zheng, 2010; Chen, 2018)[21,22]. In the 1990s, although the government did not officially designate Akihabara as an "ACG demonstration zone," individual preferences significantly shaped the urban landscape. This led to Akihabara's transformation from an emerging center for consumer electronics to a central gathering place for the otaku community (Morikawa, 2003)[15], with a further promotion of Akihabara being a pivotal site for the dissemination and commercialization of otaku culture. Consequently, the production of space in Akihabara during this period was largely driven from the bottom up by cultural groups. Through their continuous consumption, interactions and activities, these groups gradually redefined the function and significance of the area, establishing it as an essential symbol of otaku culture.

Moving into the new century, otaku culture is regarded as a valuable political and capital resource. Aso Taro, who ran for prime minister in 2007 and was successfully elected the following

year, positioned otaku culture as a source of global success and national pride in a campaign speech (LDPchannel, 2008)[23]. It was Akihabara where he held. Additionally, the 'Cool Japan' strategy is an important initiative by the Japanese government to promote popular Japanese food, anime and local products globally, with the aim of positioning these cultural elements as drivers of economic growth and enhancing Japan's international image through the demonstration of soft power (May, 2019)[24]. Under these circumstances, the development potential of Akihabara has attracted much attention, driving governments and corporations to launch a new project called The Crossfield, focusing on regenerating Akihabara into a global IT industry base. The project's development team recognizes the achievements of the otaku community in energizing Akihabara and presents an intention of integrating and utilizing this culture to revitalize local industries (Galbraith, 2018)[12].

However, Japanese governments and capital do not fully accept otaku culture, they try to regulate this community and filter out inappropriate behaviors in order to prevent Akihabara from being perceived as eccentric by tourists, thus guaranteeing the smooth implementation of the 'Cool Japan' strategy (Galbraith, 2018)[12]. This has created a significant divergence with the otaku, who regard Akihabara as a lived space for self-expression, triggering a severe backlash. Fans of 'Haruhi Suzumiya' would gather on the Akihabara streets and dress in the school uniforms of the female protagonists, performing exuberant cheerleading dances. This display provoked dissatisfaction among local shopkeepers and resulted in multiple evictions by the police (anachira2006, 2006)[25]. As a response, organizers amongst the otaku made political statements on the streets, staging Akihabara liberation demonstrations, demanding that Akihabara be preserved for otaku and opposing its redevelopment as a showcase for 'Cool Japan' (Galbraith, 2018)[12]. The pedestrian paradise was temporarily closed in 2008 after a devastating attack that indiscriminately injured people in Akihabara[26]. Despite the fact that the killer was not related to the otaku community and Akihabara was a random choice, the government responded by installing approximately 50 new security cameras and the increase of police patrol (Japan Today, 2010)[27]. Choo (2018) contends that otaku's deviance is relatively harmless compared to the activities of organized criminals. He argues that the government's true objective is to attract more tourists by adding a layer of safety and security to Akihabara's image[28]. It is about space control in a technical and secure approach without considering the damage to otaku's performance, in a way, their culture presentation and identity recognizance.

Hall (2002) posits that symbols in popular culture, such as language, images, and music, are polysemous, meaning that different individuals and groups can ascribe varied meanings to the same symbol. This polysemousness transforms symbols into arenas of conflict[29]. This series of events illustrates that space itself is a contested field, subject to the tussling of different forces. Contradictions and confrontations during the production and reproduction of space stem from diverse interpretations arising from various domains. The conflict is the contest of power and meaning, as well as the delivery of covert intention. The government and capitalists have endeavored to shape Akihabara as a showcase of Japan's soft power through the 'Cool Japan' strategy. This top-down approach to space reproduction aims to regulate and control spatial expressions to align with national image-building and economic development goals. In stark contrast, the resistance of the otaku community represents a bottom-up defense of spatial control, expressing dissatisfaction with mainstream culture and authority while protecting their own cultural identity. However, otaku often finds themselves in a vulnerable position in this struggle against more powerful forces. This vulnerability is evident not only in the disparity of resources and power but also in the legitimacy and social recognition of their cultural expressions. The government and capitalist entities possess greater resource deployment capabilities and policy-making power, enabling them to regulate and influence Akihabara's spatial production through legal, economic, and administrative means. This phenomenon underscores the fluidity and multi-layered nature of power

within cultural spaces, where various forces interact, confront, and negotiate to shape the meaning and value of space. Understanding the complexity of this spatial production allows for a deeper comprehension of power relations and cultural dynamics in urban environments.

9. Conclusion

This paper takes Akihabara as an example to reveal the characteristics of the spatial practice in this otaku culture-centering area by exploring the logic underlying the construction of cultural space and analyzing the process of space production and reproduction. The incorporation of otaku culture into spatial theory emphasizes the urban discrepancy of Akihabara. It provides a deeper understanding of its cultural uniqueness, the creativity involved in its space production, and the dynamic changes it undergoes among the force struggles. Apart from the elucidation of the example. It is an extensional application of theory in the production of space in diverse culture space. The theoretical framework employed in this paper offers valuable insights for the study of other urban cultural phenomena. The conclusions are as follows:

By revealing the constructive mechanism of the space production of otaku culture in Akihabara, it becomes evident that this area achieves a dynamic unity of the physical, mental, and social realms through three ways: taking advantage of the urban development and the reconfiguration of space functions, establishing a shared imagination and a sense of cultural belonging, as well as facilitating the integration of new social relations between the digital world and reality; In examining the space production processes in Akihabara, it is apparent that the triadic competition among power, capital, and life continuously reshapes the space. In this context, the cultural community finds itself in a relatively weakened position compared to capital and governmental entities.

This paper examines the interactions between culture and space in the pre-pandemic era. In light of post-pandemic phenomena, such as the departure of large-scale capital-operated chain shops and the rise in female service business, exemplified by maid cafes and escorted entertainment venues (Xiong, 2020; Monday Late Show, 2020)[30,31], further literature reviews and site investments are essential for a comprehensive analysis. Moreover, understanding how the production of space in otaku culture manifests outside of Japan, considering its roots as a quintessentially Japanese cultural phenomenon, requires further exploration.

References

[1] Lefebvre, H. 1991. The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell.

[2] Aida, M. 2005. The Construction of Discourses on Otaku: The History of Subcultures from 1983 to 2005. Hiroshima Shudai Ronshu, 46 (1), pp. 17-58.

[3] Nakamori, A. 1989. The Reasons Why I Became the Godfather of "Otaku". Tokyo: Bessatsu Takarajima, pp. 89–100.

[4] Asaba, M. 1989. Angels Adrift in Advanced Consumer Society'. The Book of Otaku. Tokyo: Bessatsu Takarajima, pp. 251–271.

[5] Nakajima , A. 1991, Komyunikeshon fuzen shokogun [Communication Deficiency Syndrome], Tokyo : Chikuma Shobo .

[6] Miyadai , S. 1994. The Choices of Uniformed Girls. Tokyo: Kōdansha.

[7] Okada, T. 1996. Introduction to Otakuology. Tokyo: Ota Shuppan.

[8] Satoru, K. 2008. The Transformation and Diffusion of Otaku Stereotypes and the Establishment of Akihabara as a Place-brand. In P. W. Galbraith, T. H. Kam, & B. Kamm (Eds.), Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan (pp. 147-162). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[9] Zhuona-Borijihan. 2014. I'm a Fan, Therefore I'm Here: An Anthropological Study of the Lifestyles of Japanese Anime Otaku. Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

[10] Zhong, Z. J. 2022. The Construction, Production and Interconstruction of Urban Subcultural Spaces--The Case of Live House. Shehuikexuedongtai, (11): 24-33.

[11] Liu, Y. 2012. On high density commercial space at Shinjuku and Akihabara. Shanxi Architecture. 2012, 38 (14): 3-4.

[12] Galbraith, P. W. 2018. Akihabara: Promoting and Policing "Otaku" in "Cool Japan". In A. Freedman & T. Slade (Eds.), Introducing Japanese Popular Culture (pp. 350-362). London; New York, NY: Routledge.

[13] Galbraith, P. W, Kam, T. H & Kamm, B. 2015. Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[14] Zhuona-Borijihan. 2014. I'm a Fan, Therefore I'm Here: An Anthropological Study of the Lifestyles of Japanese Anime Otaku. Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

[15] Morikawa, K. 2003. Learning from Akihabara: The Birth of a Personapolis. Gentosha Literary Publication.

[16] Lin, J. 2015. On the Sociality of Space: An Inquiry of A Theoretical Topic. Open Times, 2015, (06): 135-144+8.

[17] Uno, T. 2015. "Imagination after the Earthquake: Japan's Otaku Culture in the 2010s." Verge: Studies in Global Asias 1 (1): 114.

[18] Azuma, H. 2012. Otaku: Japan's Database Animals. (Z Xuanchu, Trans.). BIG ART Co., Ltd. Taibei, Taiwan. (Original work published 2001).

[19] W, Y & W, S. 2009. A communicative perspective of the Japanese culture of the otaku (race of yuzhai). Journal of Hebei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science). 32 (02): 151-155.

[20] USHIGAKI, Y. 2012. Formation of and Change in Commercial Accumulation in the Akihabara District, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo. Geographical Review of Japan Series A 85 (4): 383–396.

[21] Zheng, Z. 2010. Space: A concept of sociology. Socialogical Studies. 25 (05): 167-191+245.

[22] Chen, S. 2018. The Three Logics of Urban Public Space Production in China and Their Balance. Academic Monthly, 50 (05): 101-110.

[23] LDPchannel. 2008. "Taro Aso Speaks in Akiba." abaibalbe at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KE4lxOkwliI.

[24] May, S. 2019. The Power of Cute. Princeton New Jersey ; Oxford England: Princeton University Press.

[25] Aanachira2006. 2006. "Haruhi Suzumiya Dance Police Evictions Stopped in Midstream." https://www. youtube.com/ watch?v=1xMaY6JYb1c.

[26] NHK. 2019. Human Crossroads. Documentary.

[27] Japan Today. 2010. 16 security cameras installed on Akihabara streets. available at: https://japantoday. com/ category / crime/16-security-cameras-installed-on-akihabara-streets

[28] Choo, K. 2018. "Cool Governance: Japan's Ubiquitous Society, Surveillance, and Creative Industries." Culture, Theory and Critique 59 (2): 94–118.

[29] Hall, S. 2022. Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular.' In Z. Y. Huang, & D, Morley (Eds.), Stuart Hall literate collections. (pp. 439-452).

[30] Xiong, J. J. 2020. 17 years of business, "Sega Akihabara Hall 2" officially closed last night. Available at: https://www.gcores.com/articles/128159

[31] Monday Late Show. 2020. Talk show. NTV.