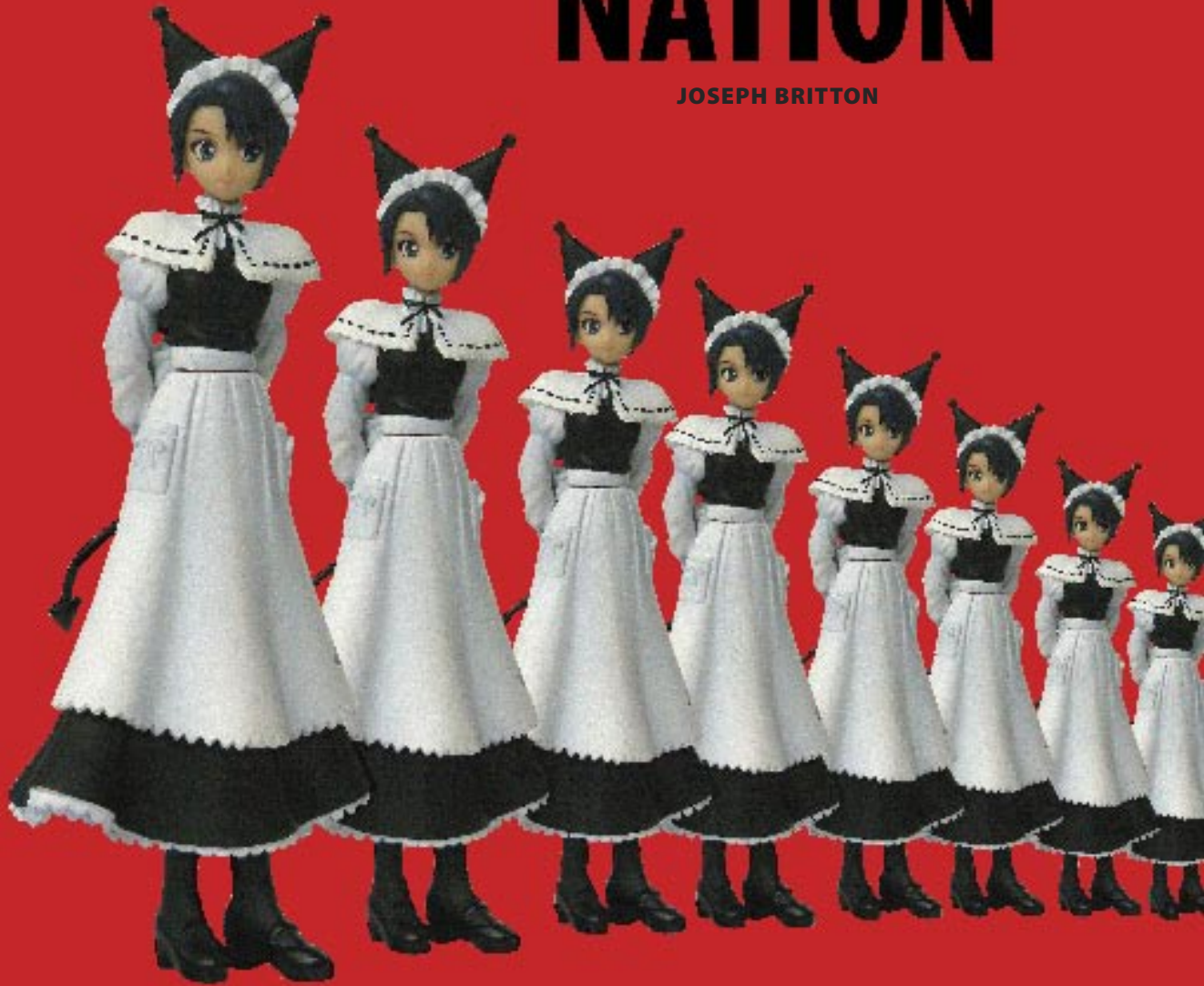


OTACOOOL NATION

JOSEPH BRITTON



A man who is ill-adjusted to the world is always on the point of finding himself. One who is adjusted to the world never finds himself, but gets to be a cabinet minister. —Hermann Hesse

A FRESH LOOK AT OTAKU CULTURE

Japanese youth culture is particularly sensitive to trends that sweep the country, changing direction swiftly, like flocks of birds or schools of fish. With Japanese youth redefining and reshaping themselves — physically, mentally and spiritually — what does this mean for the country's future and how is it influencing the lifestyle and quality of communications of youth culture elsewhere in the world?

Newcomers often perceive Japanese society as a finely calibrated machine, with endless checks and balances to ensure that all follow the time-honored rules. In this country of overlapping groups whose members lend support to all within each circle, what happens when some individuals deliberately reject their pre-determined roles?

To find out, I interviewed more than 400 students of computer science, mathematics, physics, science and engineering, all sympathetic to and naturally aligned with *otaku* ('nerd' or 'geek') tendencies. -My survey revealed a trend

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running counter to the mainstream image of Japanese salarimen and always-in-style young ladies (*oshare gyaru*).

Japanese otaku are mostly male, yet there is a striking surge in female otaku whose highly visible presence in full hero costumes animate the supernatural atmosphere of the large anime and on-line gaming conventions frequently held in Tokyo and Yokohama. General tendencies revealed among Japanese otaku include pacifist/Buddhist beliefs, intellectual motivation, good short-term memory and multi-tasking ability. As anime fans, fantasy seekers, collectors of idol figurines, and avid gamers, they tend to be comfortable with robot companions and to prefer virtual (non-physical-body) worlds. Avoiding hugging, touching and greetings, otaku are reluctant to communicate in person with others and are very shy with the opposite sex. Fashion-wise, they are oblivious to big department store clothing styles and the season, preferring checked or anime print shirts, and chemically-washed slim jeans, small backpacks, caps and scarves throughout the year. Typically they like the convenience of processed fast foods including McDonald's, Mos Burger, Yoshinoya cheap beef dishes, vending machine "oden kan," and processed nutrition bars. Priorities are set around mind-time, time to explode the boundaries of the inner phantasmagoric world. The External leisurely functions of window-shopping, eating, and speaking consume time. If otaku eat, it's generally quick, easy and taste stimulating.

As a thriving subculture, otaku are driving the engines of Japan's economy while challenging the ways we connect with others with their new modes of social interaction. The 1990s are often referred to as the "lost decade," but during this period the exports of Japanese pop culture tripled. JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) records show that in 2001, the export market generated by the Japanese youth culture of fantasy entertainment produced eleven trillion yen in revenues. By 2010 it is expected to exceed fifteen trillion yen.¹ In 2005 auto exports exceeded ten trillion yen. The fantasy production volume has burgeoned so fast, that much is now being outsourced to South Korean firms and even to the US. In 2006, Japanese anime (animation) TV shows/movies, alone, generated more than 400 billion yen in revenues in the US market, along with 135 anime conventions that drew more than 130,000 devotees. Otaku enchantment with developing anthropomorphic robots, computer-

generated anime, manga, computational intelligence, screened simulated social networks, and non-physical communications has spawned virtual environments of the imagination with a highly dedicated, sub-culture infrastructure. These parallel simulated environments are now strongly influencing the world youth mind-set. More than a movement with a focus and a center, it's an unfolding of a state of consciousness, a change in the way of being in, or out, of the process of functioning in society; thereby influencing and redefining what makes a society. Via the omnipresence of multi-media outlets and devices world youth and entertainment enterprises have been closely following Japanese youth lifestyles, with eyes wide open.

Combining 'otaku' and the fashionable social distinction of being 'cool,' I have coined the word 'otacool.'

Japan is becoming an otacool nation.

ETYMOLOGY

Within the etymology of the word 'otaku' (お宅) is the honorific term for another's house or family. It is also used as a second person pronoun, as in "thou" or the singular *vous* in French. Today though, it is a slang word, written in *hiragana* (おたく) or *katakana* (オタク), referring to an alleged fanatic with the character traits of a geek or nerd. This label of otaku/fanatic has once again changed places on the spinning wheel of meaning; but first, where did it come from?

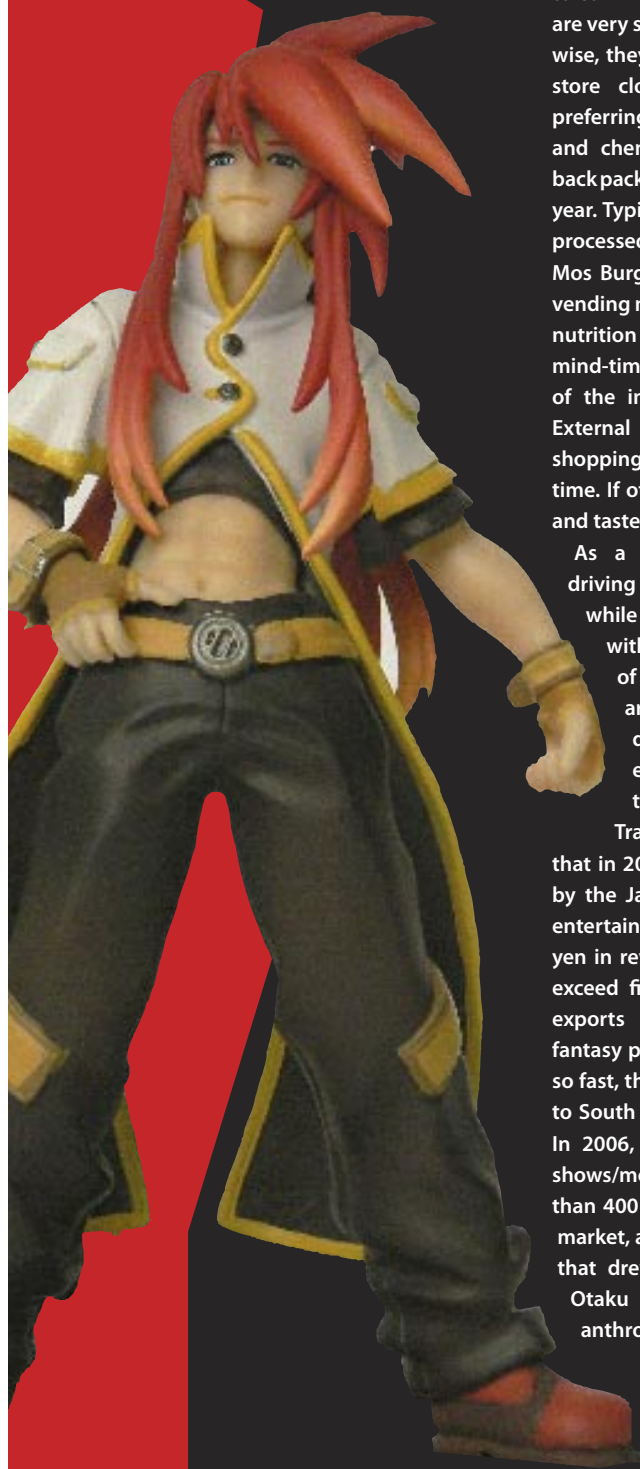
The word 'otaku' went through a negative metamorphosis in the 1980s, with the writings of humorist and essayist Nakamori Akio². His influence can be seen in such otaku-related comments as,

"They are the type that generally live in their parents' basement at 30 years old and have no social life," (Urban Dictionary), and, "The Japanese have never been good at verbal communication, but the problem with 'otaku' is that they are so engrossed in their own favorite world and don't have the ability, interest, or confidence to interact with other human beings. Their impact on society is enormous."

(Mizushima Hiroko, a legislator & psychiatrist writing in the *Washington Post*, reprinted in *Japan Today*).

This negative stereotype spread through the Japanese psyche and still colors the otaku of today, but changes are ahead.

There are many manifestations of the Japanese otaku, but my research has focused on the technologically driven and inwardly seeking *geimu* (video and online gaming) *otaku*, the *paasokon otaku*



(personal computers), *roboto* (robots) otaku and a variety of other virtual-reality-centered otaku and their interaction with the outer world.

DEVELOPMENT OF OTAKU CULTURE

While the first TV video game was conceptualized as early as 1951, it was not until 1966 that Magnavox's first playable video game appeared in arcades. *Odyssey*, the first home video game, was released in 1972. Nintendo's Famicom ushered in a new era and level of game playing in 1982, giving the company nearly complete worldwide control over the video game industry until the 1995 release of SONY's Play Station, and Sega's Saturn.

In fact, 1995 was a monumental year in game development. A 30-year-old Japanese designer, Tajiri Satoshi, who as a child was called "Dr. Bug," created a video game whereby the players could catch, collect, and train hundreds of creatures known as Pokémon (*Poketto Monsutaa*; ポケットモンスター). Pokémon became a multi-billion dollar franchise empire capturing the video game, anime, manga, card, book, and other media venues.

These Pokémon could evolve by learning new and more powerful techniques. They did not die, but merely fainted, allowing them to fight another day. For Tajiri, their ability to evolve and the absence of blood were critical. In interviews³, he has mentioned that as a child he would observe insects communicating but also competing with one another. But to his dismay, the trees around his neighborhood were slowly being cut down and the insect population was decreasing. Tajiri took these ideas and created the concept of a communication cable between two players who, as in karate, compete yet subtly bow to each other in respect. It was important for him that these Pokémon monsters were controllable by the players. "It could be the monster within yourself, [representing] fear or anger, for example."⁴

This, I believe, frames the true, and often hidden, nature of otaku. Tajiri, whose influence in the gaming world has been of enduring significance, embodies a personality that was often alone, searching, highly sensitive to the world around him, striving for new ways to communicate, looking for peaceful ways to compete, and averse to bloody violence. These attributes he took into the inner world of video-game playing; the world that would soon be inhabited by millions of otaku worldwide.

POP ART

Ono Junichi is a teenage pop artist phenomenon. In 2003, *Time Magazine* chose him as one of Asia's top ten child prodigies. From an early age he has traveled freely through the world of symbols, images and meaning. In his bright, private and secluded room, filled with pens, pencils, paper, computers and games, the creations of his lively imagination take shape. At the age of eight, he gave his first exhibition of sketches from his impressions after visiting the Statue of Liberty. At ten, he published his first book. NHK-TV has made a documentary on his life that has been aired at least six times by viewers' request. He has held exhibitions in New York and Seoul, and by request of former Prime Minister Koizumi met with President Bush as a peace advocate. He has held charity exhibitions for Afghan refugees and victims of the tsunami disaster of 2004 — his colorfully inspired artwork is seen on T-shirts, postcards, bags, accessories and TV anime, expressing hope for global peace and friendship.

Although Ono Junichi exhibits otaku tendencies of spending endless hours outside of school, alone in his room, dreaming into and exploring what artistic realities he and his computer can create together, when he emerges from his mind den, he attempts

to bring meaning to his art by encouraging open discussions on his website. Junichi represents today's otacool.

MMORPG

We are now in the world of **MMORPG**, or for many people, it is in us. I'm referring to the intoxicating dopamine-driven mind rush induced by *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*. Today's online software uses complex routines that allow the characters to respond to each situation differently. The software today is a form of artificial intelligence. And the processing speed of the hardware is fast, very fast. The characters and their settings look mystifyingly alive and appear to act in real time. Upon entering this world, your character can act out chosen personas, changing personality, appearance, name, and virtual setting.

With Japan's world dominance of TV video games, manga and cartoon animation in the States, southeast Asia, along with 90% of the French TV animation production, it was a natural transition for creative otaku to dive into **MMORPGs**. The natural affinity of otaku specifically, and Japanese in general, towards blurring the lines of reality between men, machines, supernatural beings, and extraordinary life forms, along with smoothly blending the future, past and present into non-linear time frames grabbed the imagination of the world's youth who had access to these stories. With the arrival of Internet, these fantasies morphed into online virtual realities with anything seeming possible.

Some of the more popular titles are: *Final Fantasy XI* by Square Enix of Tokyo (at the end of 2006 the entire FF series had sold a total of 110 million units), *Everquest 2*, by SONY sold worldwide from November 2004; *World of Warcraft* (WoW), launched in

November 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment (based in California) with claims of being the biggest with over eight million registered players; and now *Lineage II*, by South Korean based NCsoft, the world's second biggest **MMORPG**, all with an engaging mix of war, politics and military strategy. They have come a long way from Tajiri Satoshi's idea of "no-blood," as the combination of being provocative, racy and violent has become a big attractor.

Nick Yee,⁵ online gaming researcher at Stanford University, in interviewing 40,000 online gamers throughout the States,





Sign for a *Meido Kissa* in Osaka's Nipponbashi

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Europe, Japan, South Korea and China, compiled the following demographics: Average age: 26; Range in age: 11–69; Teenagers: 25%; Female users: 12% (depending on the game); Working full time: 50%; Married: 36%; With children: 22%. He found that their average gaming time per week is 20 hours, though for many it is not unusual to play 40 hours a week.

In the world of **MMORPGs**, typically, a new person will join a guild, or group of members. Each guild member takes on a certain personality trait that responds accordingly to the other members and the action at hand. Yee found the characters most often chosen are the tragic: slain parents, pained lovers, the zany: humorous, never tragic, the interactive: scripted parts gradually developed by others' responses to them, drama queens — overly emotional, high strung, heroes and villains.

For many people, with varying shades and degrees of otaku nature, the virtual world is not only a release from the stresses of the real world, but a place to "safely" work out, explore, experiment, and grow with newly discovered parts of themselves. Actually, joining a guild in an online game can be very challenging in demanding teamwork, communicating decisively with others, socializing, acting courageously and creatively, maintaining a focus, and at times, showing leadership skills. The rewards are the building of prestige as one moves to higher levels of playing, pushing the limits of power and gaining a sense of accomplishment, along with the virtual accumulation of loot (virtual reward items).

Not all gamers are otaku, and not all otaku traits are negative.

Through my interviews, I've come to the conclusion that online role-playing games do not create psychological conditions in the players such as withdrawal, depression, anti-social behaviour, and an inability to cope with real world conditions, along with feelings of being misunderstood, not accepted by others, and not being appreciated. Online gaming does not cause but rather highlights existing symptoms, and for many, provides a setting from which it is possible to nurture undeveloped positive traits.

MOE CULTURE

"*Moe moe!*" is an exclamation of approval used by otaku. *Moe* (originally "budding") is slang for a "very cute thing, or lovely thing," such the as otaku-adored characters in manga, anime, video and online gaming. (Anime characters are often orphaned, yet independent, reflecting how otaku often think of themselves).

An extensive industry has been built around moe culture. Shirts printed with moe characters, moe and otaku pants and hats that have now been universally integrated into standard clothing; figurines of anime and on-line gaming idols and heroes, along with many more games, manga and anime are consumed by the ever-loyal otaku and now an ever-growing fan base of mainstream followers. Fully 65% of anime productions worldwide are made in Japan, but South Korea and China are quickly catching up, adapting a moe culture including all the electronic devices and lifestyle items that support it.

The famous electronic gadget districts of Akihabara in Tokyo and Nipponbashi in Osaka are now full of moe doll stores. Often they are found near maid cafes (*meido kissa*), theme cafes that cater to otaku. At a maid café, a young waitress dressed in a traditional European maid outfit, or a teacher or nurse's uniform, will greet the customer by saying "Welcome Master," while bowing reverentially. Large journal books are provided in the café for the customer to write short letters to his favorite maid. As part of her job, she will soon write a response in the journal so that when he returns, he can sit leisurely by himself, eating a dessert, while reading this letter from his fantasy admirer.

2-CHANNEL

If otaku are shy and indirect about their face-to-face communications, then what form of communication, outside of gaming, can channel their need to share? In 1999, Nishimura Hiroyuki entered upon the Japanese social stage. Despite being a *hikikomori* (an adolescent or young adult who has chosen to withdraw from the world, often a severely reclusive version of otaku), Nishimura started a major social phenomenon, **2-Channel** (*ni chaneru*) — the most popular website in Japan, and one of the largest message boards (BBS) in the world. This site daily receives more than one million posts and over 20 million views (hits). Why has **2-Channel** attracted so many people? Firstly, it offers over 200 topics of discussion, from computer hacking to preparing a sumptuous dinner to political leadership. It's an attention-getter, announcing events or



news that Japanese feel close to; it arouses group action against unjust social laws and corporate misbehavior, and encourages group protests against corrupt politicians. Finally, **2-Channel** offers anonymity — there is no social pressure from personal criticism on posted points of view; no dominant person exerting influence or control, and each idea is as acceptable as the next.

At first sight, one might describe this as a Japanese nation-wide estrangement from the stresses of everyday life and, in turn, a diminishing of the quality of communications one might receive in face-to-face relationships. Yet I see **2-Channel** as a broad-based communication platform serving a deep-seated need for Japanese to connect emotionally and intellectually. Along with the desirous aspect of being part of a group, friendships are deepened and new ones created, albeit virtually. For the otaku, it's an emotionally safe way to express thoughts and new ideas without being judged by others. Today's Japanese society is fast-paced, with many demands — a reality inherited, not brought on, by the young.

MIXI

How about simple, relaxing fun? Let's take a look at **MIXI**, the biggest Japanese Community Entertainment Social Network. Founded by Kasahara Kenji in 2004, it took merely two years to reach five million users, and 70% of the members are in their teens and early twenties. How does it work? People join a circle by invitation only, free of charge. (Members must be eighteen or older.) They can communicate with people of similar interests — personal profiles and diaries can be read only by circle members. Blogging is free, up to a limited amount of storage, and personal lifestyle preferences can be shared within the circle, e.g. music can be downloaded. Reviews of movies, music, and products are provided by members.

The **MIXI** phenomenon symbolizes more focused, innovative, broader and richer communication and relationships with others and the world at large.

OTACOOl NATION?

Japan's "GNC" (Gross National Cool) is rising. The entertainment/storytelling industry spawned by inwardly directed otaku and visionary otacool has become an important worldwide economic and reality driver. Though it cannot be said that otacool has become mainstream yet, it can be asserted that by merely participating in Japanese society, otacool tendencies of various forms of driven fanaticism and fantasy start to

re-order one's psyche. "I" becomes more and more the center of the universe with education, business, communications and social networks creatively directed towards entertaining "me." In line with this ancient commandment "know thyself", Life Integration counselors will flourish.

It may seem that I've completely embraced the otacool lifestyle of befriending intelligent computers and withdrawing into fantasy worlds and virtual communication relationships. Actually, while I believe in their premise and promise of an enriched life through extension of the wonder of our imagination, I am interested in three issues regarding the otacool lifestyle.

First, as Japan is moving more towards becoming an otacool nation, there is a tendency among young people to withdraw from the outer real world, and become physically isolated in a world of their own making. The negative implications of this could be seriously detrimental to the country, including such areas as forsaking responsible work and an inability to maintain harmony within social interactions.

Second, on the edges of society, there is a polarization that is growing ever stronger. Politically, the ultra-conservative far right, which fosters militaristic nationalism, has become more active, threatening and, at times, reactively violent towards people who speak out publicly on issues that run counter to right-wing beliefs. The otacool, though not a political force and seeming to take little political action, are taking up the ultra left, liberal, anti-war, unobstructed freedom position. Through growing into and developing engaged and informed "opinion and solution" exchanges, these internalizers would provide a new outer light to shine on the Japanese socio-political arena.

My third concern is integration. To be fully functioning, active, healthy, contributing members of society, otacool must find a balance between living in the inner and outer worlds. There is a time to go within to collect, to assimilate, to refresh, to organize, and to renegotiate one's relationship with the greater Life. And there's a time to go outward into the world as an integrated whole being.

One vital question: Who is willing and capable of understanding the special characteristics and needs of these restless and wired otaku, and guiding them in their maturation towards the health and wholeness of otacool?



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5. Yee, Nick, *The Blurring Boundaries of Play: Labor, Genocide, and Addiction*, PARC forum (Palo Alto Research Center), July 20, 2006, Stanford University. Currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication at Stanford University.

ENDNOTES

See also a very informative Oct. 2005 report by Nomura Research Institute, "New Market Scale Estimation for Otaku: Population of 1.72 Million with Market Scale of ¥411 Billion" including a comparative analysis of five types of otaku: <http://www.nri.co.jp/english/news/2005/051006.html>

*In another interesting exploration of the impact of otaku culture: <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/japan/c1.html>

JOSEPH BRITTON teaches Communications of the Mass Media and Professional Presentations at Osaka Prefectural University

