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The Impact of Japanese Animation in the United States

No matter where you look, you can see the impact of Japanese Animation, whether it is in media, domestic animation, celebrity endorsements etc. To dive into the effects of Japanese Animation, we first need to define what Japanese Animation is. Japanese Animation, in short, “Anime,” is well known for its incredible artwork, vibrant characters, and unique design. Unlike Western animation, Anime covers complex themes and more mature content; this is partly why audiences may be older than Western animation audiences. Anime is intertwined with Japanese culture and is an aesthetically pleasing use of soft power for Japan. Many shows cover traditional festivals, cuisine, childhood life, and societal issues. These reasons are why Anime has become such a big hit in the West. It is hard to browse social media without seeing profile pictures of famous anime characters or merchandise in big-name stores with big logos from many series. It has had an impact not only on popular culture but also on Western animation itself. And the controversial topics about cutting and altering original Japanese work to fit Western audiences and how the animation spheres are intertwined. My argument is that a good deal of this popularity has come from the Covid-19 pandemic and being indoors. I do not believe this is the main reason for the popularity; however, I think it is a significant factor in recent popularity that interests me. Japanese animation has influenced how American audiences partake and engage with animation in practice; it has also had a massive impact on American pop culture and many peoples’ daily lives.

One cannot discuss early Japanese Anime without talking about “Astro Boy.” Astro Boy is one of the most influential anime of all time worldwide. It was created by Osamu Tezuka, also known as the “God of Manga.” In 1963, NBC first aired Astro Boy in the United States, and it became a big hit. Astro Boy paved the way for other anime such as “Speed Racer” and “Gigantor,” other big hits in the United States. Another of the earliest times we can trace back to the popularity of Anime in the United States is referenced by Andrew C. McKevitt in the paper “*You Are Not Alone!*”: *Anime and the Globalizing of America*”. McKevitt writes, “The two thousand people filling “every seat in the biggest room in Baltimore” on the final night of the 1983 World Science Fiction Convention were not waiting to see the summer's biggest sci-fi blockbuster, Return of the Jedi. Instead, these devoted fans lingered until 1:00 a.m. to screen a film virtually unknown in the United States —the Japanese animation feature Uchū senkan Yamato: kanket suhen (Space Battleship Yamato: The Final Chapter)”. This is a stark example of how Japanese culture started becoming popular in the United States in the early days of anime. The two thousand people filling that room were there to enjoy Japaneseness and consume media globally. They wanted something different from the norm. This is one of the main reasons why Japaneseness became so popular and is part of why it is part of American popular culture today. To discuss the impact and importance of Anime in the United States, it is necessary to examine its origins and what brought it about in the first place. These examples show why popular media today can't resist Japanese Animation.

The path for Anime to become mainstream in the United States was not easy; however, with the introduction and continuation of Anime being brought over to the United States,

producers felt some of the Anime needed change. Alterations are standard practice in Japanese Animation regarding distribution, especially to Western audiences. One of the most famous examples is when Hayao Miyazaki, the founder of Studio Ghibli, sent a Katana to Harvey Weinstein, a well-known producer who wrote “No Cuts.” Later, Miyazaki said in an interview: “Actually, my producer did that. Although I did go to New York to meet this man, this Harvey Weinstein, and I was bombarded with this aggressive attack, all these demands for cuts.” He smiles. “I defeated him.” Miyazaki disapproved of alterations made to his work and can be an example of how other creators and authors must feel when changing their original work. Based on personal experience, many people I have met also disagree with making cuts to anime as they want to consume the media in the form that the author intended. Dragon Ball Z is one of the most popular Anime of all time, and it had its fair share of cuts and alterations to fit Western appeal and audiences. One character that goes by “Mr. Satan” in the Japanese version has changed his name to “Hercule” for the English translation. Some alterations are favorable; however, minor nudity is being covered, which is unnecessary for the story's plot. Blood, death, and gore have been censored as well to not portray as much violence to children watching the show. In general, these changes can be seen as harmless and helpful for the younger audience, but a good number of viewers and fans would like the raw, unedited versions.

Anime has taken American Pop Culture by storm, merchandise, media trends, communities, record-breaking views on new shows etc. Anime is now part of mainstream pop culture, and thanks to social media and trends, it has not stopped and has no sign of slowing down. New shows such as “Jujutsu Kaisen” and “Attack on Titan” are top-rated in the West and have broken viewing records. When new episodes are released, trends on TikTok and hashtags

go trending on Twitter, with people discussing their favorite moments. Just to grasp how popular anime is in the United States, “Anime News Network” has an article referencing anime's popularity with recent movie releases worldwide. “The Dragon Ball Super: Super Hero anime film earned US\$4,303,671 on Thursday (its preview day) and US\$6,441,593 on Friday, for a combined opening-day total of US\$10,745,264 in 3,007 locations in the U.S.” This puts into perspective how popular anime has become in recent years. “Netflix is developing a new anime series based on “Scott Pilgrim,” a hit graphic novel series, The Hollywood Reporter reported Friday. It previously touted its investments in anime, reporting that more than 100 million households globally watched at least one anime title on its platform between October 2019 and September 2020, a 50% increase from the year prior.” Anime popularity is booming and has no signs of slowing down; new series are often announced, and hype is built up online on social media. Japanese animation has been proven to be an unstoppable force, and these statistics clearly show that. A great article by Anne Allison, “Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination,” writes about YuGiOh, Pokemon, and globalization. Allison states that Japanese “cool” is being led by pop culture, such as animation, games, and toys. Allison writes how the interest in Japanese culture and commodities comes from the interest in being into something “different” and “unique”. According to Allison(2006) “As with Peter, part of the appeal of the gameplay is its novelty. Whether because of the Japanese script, foreign references, or visual design, Yu-Gi-Oh! has a distinctly non-American feel. Retaining, even purposely playing up, signs of cultural difference is more the trend today than simple Americanization of such imports” (p. 2). Peter is an excellent example of how Americans are interested in something unique and different from the norm in the United States. K-Pop is another example of this

phenomenon, which is having a surge in popularity in the United States as well;. However, most Americans do not understand Korean; there is something distinctly different and unique about the music that appeals to them. And Allison states that its not that the anime is Japanese or the K-Pop is Korean but that it is something different from the norm. These are some examples of the impact of Japanese animation and culture in the United States.

Covid-19 was a difficult time, and people faced many hardships from illnesses, financial crises, loss of life and much more. However, one industry profited from Covid-19: the entertainment industry. Since people were stuck in their homes without work and school, entertainment was needed; many turned to gaming and TV shows. According to Parrot Analytics, anime popularity has increased by 118% in the past two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. People had more free time, fewer responsibilities, and more sitting around the house. All of these are perfect reasons to check out some Japanese animation. The gaming industry also profited heavily from the pandemic, which has some correlation to how Anime saw its rise. People had more time on their hands to learn new languages, find new hobbies, and explore exciting topics they did not have time to do before the lockdowns. As mentioned previously, people want to experience something unique and different from the norm, and Anime is perfect to satisfy that craving.

Out of the pandemic, we now have celebrities mentioning and expressing their love for anime. In interviews, Mike Daniels and Myles Garrett mentioned their love for Dragon Ball Z. Zion Williamson, a player for the New Orleans Pelicans, said that he believes 80% of NBA players are into and watch anime regularly. Kanye West, one of the most famous hip-hop artists of all time, mentioned that the movie “Akira” inspired his career. West also released a music

video titled “Stronger,” which was a reenactment of scenes from the film. Hip-hop artist “Lil Uzi Vert” mentioned the anime “Naruto” in his song “New Patek, saying, “Throw up gang signs, naruto, put metal in my nose like pain.” Referencing Naruto’s ninjutsu seals with his hands and Pains’ metal piercings in his nose. These big names referencing Japanese animation show how anime is now intertwined with American pop culture and is a big inspiration in many people’s lives. I would argue that the majority of the recent popularity of Anime is not due to the Japanese directly trying to influence the United States. Still, it is American people, specifically celebrities and professional sports players, that support Anime publicly, which gives Anime its popularity as the Covid-19 pandemic has kept everyone indoors and ready to consume something different, something that gives off a cultural odor that is dissimilar to what they’ve been consuming their entire lives.

Japanese animation has had a long-lasting impact on American pop culture and will continue rising. With social media becoming a daily part of everyday life, there is unlimited potential for sharing one’s favorite anime. Researching and contemplating this topic is essential to acknowledge the reasons behind this newfound popularity that Anime has in our daily lives. Not studying and analyzing the origins and modern-day reasoning behind the impact of Japanese animation would be a disservice to the genre. The journey of Japanese animation in the United States reflects not just a cultural import but a dynamic exchange that has enriched the creative landscape in both the United States and Japan.

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