

The Role of TikTok in Shaping Cultural Identity Among Young ACGN Fans in Japan

Toru Kawashima¹

¹ Independent Researcher, Japan

Correspondence: Toru Kawashima, Independent Researcher, Japan.

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Abstract

TikTok has become a significant platform for cultural expression and identity formation, particularly among young ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) fans in Japan. This paper examines how TikTok influences cultural identity through creative expression, community building, and the hybridization of traditional and contemporary Japanese cultural elements. The platform's interactive features and algorithmic recommendations foster personalized engagement, enabling fans to participate in and shape the cultural narrative of ACGN fandom. While TikTok democratizes access to content creation and global connections, it also presents challenges, such as the commodification of ACGN culture and superficial engagement with its deeper narratives. By analyzing TikTok's dual role as a medium for cultural affirmation and a driver of digital trends, this study highlights its impact on the evolving cultural identity of Japanese youth in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: TikTok, ACGN, cultural identity, creative expression, community building

1. Introduction

TikTok has rapidly become one of the most influential platforms in shaping youth culture globally, offering an unprecedented space for creative expression and community interaction. Among niche communities, fans of Anime, Comics, Games, and Novels (ACGN) have found a thriving ecosystem on TikTok, where they can showcase their passion, connect with like-minded individuals, and reinterpret cultural narratives. In Japan, a country where ACGN culture occupies a significant cultural and economic role, TikTok serves as more than a social media platform—it is a dynamic tool for identity formation. It offers young ACGN fans an opportunity to merge traditional cultural values with modern digital expressions, cultivating a unique duality in their identity.

Through highly customizable tools and an algorithm that prioritizes engaging content, TikTok empowers users to actively participate in the creation and dissemination of ACGN-related content, ranging from cosplay and fan art to reenactments of iconic anime scenes. At the same time, the platform's interactive features like duets and hashtags foster a sense of community and collaboration, bridging online interactions with offline fandom activities. However, as TikTok grows as a cultural force, its role raises questions about the commodification of ACGN culture and its authenticity in digital spaces. This essay delves into TikTok's multifaceted impact on young ACGN fans in Japan, focusing on its role in cultural expression, community building, and the evolving nature of identity in the digital age.

2. Creative Expression as a Form of Identity Building

TikTok has transformed how young ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) fans explore and affirm their cultural identity by offering a creative outlet that is both accessible and dynamic. The platform's short-form video format, combined with its intuitive editing tools, encourages fans to produce highly personalized content. Through this process, TikTok users are not just passive consumers of ACGN culture but active participants in its reinterpretation and evolution. For young fans in Japan, TikTok offers a space to engage with the cultural

narratives of their favorite media while simultaneously expressing their individuality within a collective framework.

2.1 Participatory Creativity and Personalization

A defining characteristic of ACGN fandom on TikTok is the emphasis on participatory creativity. Fans create cosplay videos, reenact scenes from beloved anime series, and use soundtracks from games and animations as the backdrop for their performances. TikTok's editing tools enable users to add unique effects, filters, and transitions that bring a personal touch to their content. For instance, a cosplayer portraying a character from *Attack on Titan* might integrate slow-motion effects or custom sound clips to add drama to their performance, creating a reinterpretation that is both faithful to the source material and uniquely personal. This creative personalization allows users to explore their identity by merging their love for ACGN culture with their own artistic instincts. Each piece of content becomes a declaration of individuality, even as it aligns with broader community trends. By performing as their favorite characters, fans symbolically embody values, traits, and narratives they resonate with, blending fandom with personal expression in a way that reinforces their cultural identity.

2.2 Accessibility and Democratization of Content Creation

TikTok's simplicity and accessibility play a significant role in empowering young ACGN fans to participate in content creation. Unlike traditional mediums like video production or graphic design, which often require technical expertise or expensive equipment, TikTok's user-friendly interface enables anyone with a smartphone to produce polished content. This democratization lowers barriers to entry, allowing fans of diverse backgrounds to showcase their creativity. TikTok's algorithm rewards originality and engagement, rather than production quality alone, giving amateur creators a chance to gain recognition. This encourages young ACGN fans to experiment with their content without the fear of judgment, fostering a culture of inclusivity and exploration. The platform's capacity to amplify voices from different regions of Japan ensures that ACGN fandom is not restricted to metropolitan areas but includes contributions from fans across the country, enriching the cultural tapestry of the community.

2.3 Merging Digital and Physical Worlds

The creative expression fostered by TikTok is not limited to the digital realm; it often bridges into the physical world. Cosplay videos on TikTok, for example, are frequently inspired by conventions, where fans physically embody characters for social gatherings. Conversely, ideas generated on TikTok can influence real-world events, such as coordinated cosplay meetups or collaborative fan art exhibitions. This interplay between digital and physical expressions deepens the impact of TikTok as a tool for identity building, as it integrates seamlessly into existing ACGN cultural practices.

2.4 Fostering Emotional Connection Through Storytelling

TikTok also enables fans to tell stories that reflect their emotional connection to ACGN culture. Fans use the platform to explore themes of belonging, friendship, and perseverance—common in anime and games—through their content. For instance, a user might create a video montage of themselves cosplaying characters from different anime that explore resilience, tying these narratives to their personal life experiences. Such storytelling resonates with viewers, creating a shared emotional landscape that strengthens the bonds within the community.

2.5 The Role of Trends in Shaping Identity

TikTok's trends play a pivotal role in shaping how young ACGN fans express themselves. Viral challenges often encourage users to create content based on a shared theme or specific anime trope. These trends act as cultural touchpoints, allowing fans to collectively participate in expressions of identity. By joining these challenges, users feel connected to a larger, global community, even as they infuse their contributions with local or personal nuances.

TikTok serves as a transformative platform for young ACGN fans in Japan to build their cultural identity through creative expression. By providing tools for personalized engagement, democratizing content creation, and fostering both digital and physical connections, TikTok enables fans to explore who they are within the shared framework of ACGN culture. This participatory, collaborative environment not only deepens their connection to their favorite media but also empowers them to take an active role in defining and sharing their cultural narratives.

3. Community Building Through Interaction and Collaboration

TikTok serves as a dynamic hub for community building among ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) fans, fostering interaction and collaboration that transcend geographic and social boundaries. For young ACGN enthusiasts in Japan, the platform provides a vibrant space to connect with like-minded individuals, share their passion, and collectively explore cultural narratives. TikTok's features such as hashtags, duets, and challenges

are instrumental in nurturing a sense of belonging and facilitating meaningful collaboration.

3.1 Building Connections Through Hashtags and Trends

Hashtags on TikTok function as virtual meeting points where fans can congregate around shared interests. Tags like #AnimeTikTok, #Cosplay, and #OtakuLife aggregate a wide variety of content, creating searchable communities that allow users to discover creators and trends aligned with their passions. These tags not only organize content but also enable users to engage with subcultures within ACGN fandom, from niche genres of anime to specific game franchises. For instance, a fan of *My Hero Academia* can explore thousands of posts under a dedicated hashtag, connecting with other enthusiasts who share their admiration for the series. Trends and challenges further amplify this communal engagement. Viral activities, such as creating synchronized cosplay skits or participating in lip-sync challenges using popular anime soundtracks, encourage fans to contribute their unique perspectives while being part of a larger collective effort. These shared activities foster a sense of unity and create opportunities for users to interact, comment, and collaborate with one another.

3.2 Collaboration Through Duets and Co-Creation

TikTok's duet feature is a powerful tool for collaboration, allowing users to build on each other's content in real time. ACGN fans often use duets to co-create skits, harmonize over anime soundtracks, or respond to cosplay performances. This feature breaks down traditional barriers of collaboration, making it easy for users to interact with others regardless of physical location or technical skill. For example, a user might post a cosplay video portraying a protagonist from an anime, and another might duet as the antagonist, crafting a virtual scene that captures the dynamic relationship between the characters. This level of interaction enables fans to collectively recreate and expand upon beloved narratives, fostering deeper engagement with the ACGN community.

3.3 Offline Impact of Digital Communities

The sense of connection built on TikTok often translates into offline activities, further enriching the cultural experience. TikTok collaborations can inspire real-world meetups, such as cosplay events or fan art showcases, where creators interact in person after bonding through the platform. This blending of online and offline interactions strengthens the bonds within the community and reinforces the cultural identity of young ACGN fans.

3.4 Inclusivity and Global Reach

TikTok's algorithm and interactive features ensure inclusivity, giving creators from smaller regions or less mainstream fandoms a chance to gain visibility. This inclusiveness broadens the scope of the ACGN community, connecting fans from diverse backgrounds and promoting cross-cultural exchanges. For instance, a Japanese user might interact with a creator abroad who shares their love for a specific anime, creating a global network of fans united by shared passion.

TikTok excels in fostering community among young ACGN fans in Japan by encouraging interaction, collaboration, and inclusivity. Through features like hashtags, duets, and challenges, the platform creates a collaborative space where fans can connect, co-create, and translate digital bonds into real-world relationships. These interactions not only strengthen individual identity but also contribute to a thriving, dynamic ACGN community.

4. Bridging Traditional and Contemporary Japanese Culture

TikTok functions as a powerful platform for blending traditional Japanese culture with contemporary ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) influences, allowing young creators and fans to explore a dual sense of cultural identity. By integrating elements of Japan's rich heritage with the modern aesthetics of ACGN, TikTok provides a unique space where the past and present coexist, enabling a creative reimagining of cultural narratives.

One of the most notable ways this blending occurs is through visual storytelling. ACGN-inspired creators often incorporate traditional motifs such as kimono designs, Japanese gardens, or Shinto shrines into their content. For example, cosplay videos frequently feature characters from anime with historical or mythological settings, such as *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*, which borrows heavily from Taisho-era Japan and Japanese folklore. By dressing as characters who embody both traditional and fantastical elements, creators not only pay homage to Japan's cultural past but also reinterpret it for a modern audience, merging nostalgia with innovation.

Soundscapes also play a significant role in bridging the traditional and the contemporary. Many TikTok creators use audio tracks featuring traditional Japanese instruments like the koto, shamisen, or taiko drums, often remixed with electronic beats or anime soundtracks. These audio combinations offer a sensory experience that ties historical cultural elements to current ACGN trends, making traditional sounds more accessible and appealing to younger audiences. This auditory fusion reflects a broader cultural phenomenon in Japan, where modern pop culture frequently draws from and adapts traditional aesthetics.

This blending of cultural influences also extends to storytelling themes on TikTok. Many creators delve into narratives rooted in Japanese folklore, mythology, or historical events. They use TikTok to share tales of yokai (spirits) or reinterpret famous samurai legends through the lens of popular anime. These creative reinterpretations allow young ACGN fans to connect with their heritage in a way that feels relevant and engaging, emphasizing cultural continuity in a digital context.

TikTok provides a platform for introducing these hybrid cultural expressions to a global audience. International fans who admire Japanese ACGN culture often engage with content showcasing traditional aesthetics, fostering cross-cultural appreciation and dialogue. For example, a Japanese creator showcasing their cosplay inspired by *Inuyasha*, a series with strong ties to Japanese mythology, might receive feedback and interaction from fans abroad, who are eager to learn about the cultural roots embedded in such works.

This fusion of traditional and contemporary culture on TikTok does more than entertain—it educates and inspires. It allows young ACGN fans to redefine their cultural identity by balancing their appreciation for Japan’s heritage with their engagement in a globalized, digitalized world. In this way, TikTok acts as a bridge, helping to preserve traditional culture while pushing its evolution within the context of modern media and storytelling.

5. Algorithmic Influence on Cultural Exploration

TikTok’s algorithm is a transformative force in the cultural exploration of ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) fans, guiding users toward a personalized yet expansive engagement with the subculture. The platform’s “For You” page is central to this experience, leveraging data-driven recommendations to curate content that aligns with individual preferences. For young ACGN fans in Japan, this means exposure not only to mainstream anime or games but also to niche genres, underrated creators, and innovative artistic expressions. The algorithm’s ability to identify and amplify user-specific interests enables fans to discover aspects of ACGN culture they might not have encountered through traditional means.

This personalized exposure broadens the horizons of cultural exploration. A fan who primarily engages with shōnen anime might, for example, stumble upon TikToks showcasing josei manga or indie video games, sparking curiosity about other dimensions of ACGN culture. The algorithm encourages creators to experiment with new ideas, knowing their content can reach audiences who genuinely appreciate it. This dynamic fosters a feedback loop of discovery and creation, enriching the cultural tapestry of the community.

TikTok’s algorithm plays a key role in amplifying underrepresented voices within the ACGN fandom. Smaller creators, regional artists, or those exploring unconventional themes can gain visibility, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive representation of the ACGN world. For instance, a creator from rural Japan might use TikTok to showcase locally inspired manga or cosplay influenced by regional folklore, bridging geographic and cultural divides. This democratization of content creation ensures that ACGN culture reflects not just mainstream narratives but also the unique perspectives of its diverse participants.

The algorithm also facilitates cross-cultural exchanges by connecting Japanese ACGN fans with international creators, enriching their understanding of how global audiences interpret and adapt ACGN influences. Through this algorithmic guidance, TikTok fosters an ecosystem where cultural exploration is both deeply personal and richly interconnected, reinforcing the platform’s role as a powerful tool for identity formation and cultural engagement.

6. Challenges of Commodification and Superficial Engagement

TikTok’s role as a cultural hub for ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) fans is not without its challenges, particularly in the realms of commodification and superficial engagement. The platform’s emphasis on viral trends often reduces ACGN culture’s depth and intricacy to simplified snippets designed for mass appeal. Complex narratives, such as those found in long-form anime or deeply layered video games, are frequently distilled into seconds-long videos that highlight only the most eye-catching elements. While this brevity caters to TikTok’s fast-paced consumption model, it risks stripping away the contextual richness and emotional resonance that define the core of ACGN storytelling.

This commodification is further exacerbated by the platform’s global reach. To cater to an international audience, creators often focus on the most recognizable and marketable aspects of ACGN culture, such as iconic character designs or action-packed moments. This approach may sideline subtler cultural nuances, like the philosophical themes in Studio Ghibli films or the societal commentary often embedded in manga. Over time, this prioritization can contribute to a homogenized representation of ACGN culture, emphasizing aesthetic appeal over narrative depth.

Superficial engagement also fosters the potential for cultural misinterpretation and appropriation. International audiences consuming TikTok content often encounter Japanese cultural elements in isolation, detached from their historical and societal contexts. For instance, traditional attire like kimono or elements from Japanese

mythology are sometimes used as mere props in content with little regard for their cultural significance. This oversimplification risks reducing Japan's rich heritage to exoticized or decorative motifs, undermining efforts to preserve its authenticity.

The pursuit of virality can pressure creators to conform to fleeting trends rather than engage in meaningful storytelling or personal expression. This dynamic may discourage innovative creators from exploring deeper, less commercialized facets of ACGN culture, further contributing to a cycle of surface-level engagement that prioritizes entertainment over cultural authenticity.

7. Conclusion

TikTok has emerged as a transformative platform for shaping cultural identity among young ACGN fans in Japan, functioning as both a creative outlet and a social connector in an increasingly digitalized world. By providing tools for personalized expression, fostering collaborative communities, and offering a space where traditional Japanese aesthetics can merge with contemporary ACGN influences, TikTok enables users to actively engage with and redefine their cultural narratives. This platform empowers youth to embrace their individuality while participating in a collective cultural framework that connects them with both local and global audiences. Through its algorithmic design, TikTok also broadens the scope of cultural exploration, offering exposure to diverse voices and fostering inclusivity within the ACGN community. TikTok's rapid pace and emphasis on virality also present significant challenges. The risk of commodifying ACGN culture and encouraging superficial engagement underscores the importance of mindful content creation and consumption. While the platform has democratized access to cultural expression, ensuring the depth and authenticity of ACGN representation remains a critical task for both creators and audiences. As TikTok continues to evolve, it holds the potential to not only shape cultural identity but also to act as a bridge between Japan's rich cultural heritage and the demands of a globalized, digital future.

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