

## Identity Formation and Self-Esteem through Anime Consumption

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**Abstract:** *While many research has focus on the reasons for low self-esteem and a wide range of self-help books have been written teaching individuals how to increase self-esteem, an understanding on how individuals may lose their identity and how identities can be regained remains in the dark. This paper seeks to advance our understanding on how low self-identity and low self-esteem individuals are able to rebuild and regain their identity and self-esteem through anime consumption. Qualitative interviews with eighteen informants were conducted. Findings from the study suggest that individuals have low self-identities and low self-esteem due to non-conformance to societal standards and expectations. Through open coding, individuals with low self-identity and low self-esteem were found to go through five stages in the rebuilding and regaining their identities, namely awareness, exploratory, evaluation, immersion, and confirmation. Through axial coding, eight themes were identified occurring along the process, namely social pressure, search, escapism, dominance, materialism, confidence, comfort and tribal/community. Theoretical implications, marketing implications, and future research directions from the findings are also presented.*

**Keywords:** *Identity formation, Self-esteem, Anime, Consumption*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on the self is arguably the most researched topic in psychology (Myers, 2007). The self is made up of two constructs - the first being identity, which is cognitive in nature, and the second being self-esteem, which represents the affective component of the self (Rosenberg, 1965). While the cognitive construct relates to one's perception and interpretation of meanings, the affective construct reflects on the subjective life of the individual - which narrates one's thoughts, feelings and behaviour based on feelings of self-worth (which is based primarily on reflected appraisals) and feelings of efficacy (which is based on observations of the effects of one's own actions) (Owens et al., 2001), whereby one's social behaviour is a product of the two jointly operating cognitive and affective components.

Both identity and self-esteem are academic and popular phenomenon which have been vigorously researched and debated in the psychology and consumer behaviour scholarship (e.g. Borton et al., 2012 and Terry et al., 2010). In recent times, low self-esteem have been one of the most popular and frequently invoked psychological explanations for behavioural and social problems (Leary et al., 1995). The Counseling Directory (2011) noted that this segment, forms a huge percentage of the male population, and hence represents a very lucrative segment for a study. Taking their cue from social commentators and media opinion leaders, the society have come to accept that a limited sense of self-worth as a result of non-conformity to societal standards, such as pressures for social conformity and gender conformity, lies behind the reasons to low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness and insignificance, and even self-destructive acts (Emler, 2001). Though thousands of articles have been devoted to the topic, findings were constraint to insights on how self-esteem creates self-confidence and self-worth (e.g. Mruk, 2006 and Robinson et al., 1991).

In the work of Schwartz et al. (2011), life is argued as a process of exploration and a continuous search for identity. Identity formation is an important attribute that emerging adolescents and young adults develop in the human growth process (Houlihan et al., 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck and Petherick, 2006). Amongst the many varieties of sources an individual rely on in search of the most appropriate identity- the surrounding media and society often exert strong influence on the identity search.

Existing research has shown how group commitment and conforming to group norms are able to enhance an individual's identity (Terry et al., 2010). Yet, several questions remain unanswered. What happens to individuals who are unable to adhere to societal norms and standards? How will this cohort of people in the society address the issue of their low self-identity? Is there any alternative outlet for them to rely on in their search for their self-identity? For this purpose, the study looks into the case of anime consumption, where the self may be constructed through the characters and plot in the anime. The aim of the study is three-fold: (i) to investigate whether anime is a viable outlet for individuals (for the current study, males) to rely on in their search for identity; if yes, then (ii) to examine how one can rebuild and regain identity and self-esteem through the consumption of anime; and (iii) to identify the relationship between identity and self-esteem.

## 2. THE MEDIA CULTURE AND THE RISE OF ANIME

At an early age in life, children are often seen modelling their actions and behaviour based on the portrayals of ideal heroes or heroines (Allison and Goethals, 2011). Such portrayals are often transmitted through media (Singh and Lu, 2003), in which one's personality and actions can change to fit into what is perceived to be ideal (Baker, 2004). In most countries, children are well-exposed to various cartoon series and characters (Mizerski, 1995). According to Vaux (2011), cartoon characters are an essential part of children lives, in which most children have their own favourite heroes or heroines (French and Pena, 1991). As they grow older, individuals may retain an interest in cartoons, in which childhood cartoon craves are brought into adulthood (Hallmark, 2011). As individuals grow older (from kids to adolescent and/or adult), the addiction and loyalty toward cartoons may cause a trajectory of search in their preferences for cartoon viewing, in which searches for more matured cartoon characters that resembles their children memories may occur (Minecraft, 2010), which is closely linked to anime (The Escapist, 2011).

The word "anime" is the Japanese word for "animation" or "cartoon", which is adapted from the English word "animation" (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Anime attraction, as observed in Japanese youth goods such as anime and manga, has become globally popular over the past 15 years (Allison, 2009). According to Cooper-Chen (1999), anime has the ability to affect ambition and self perceptions, in which there are a larger number of animations catering to males rather than females. In the work by Nakamura (2003), it was found that anime and its related goods sold amounted to approximately one-third of revenue in the world media market, with more than 30 languages translated and reaching over 229 million unique audience per month in Asia alone (Anime News Network, 2011). Ahn (2002) noted that in almost every inhabited continent across the globe, there are anime fans and clubs, in which this uprising market continues to grow. According to Sato (1997), one of the reasons that may be attributed to the huge popularity of anime is due to the existence of Western influences ingrained in the visual style of subsequent anime characters and culture, which makes its character internationally accepted. As a large majority of anime materials cater to male viewers (Cooper-Chen, 1999), the direction of this study follows a similar line of understanding (i.e. males as its main target audience) in exploring the meaning and consumption of anime among males.

## 3. RESEARCH APPROACH

As the objective of this study is to comprehend how individuals who have low self-identity and low self-esteem rebuild and regain their identity and self-esteem through anime consumption, an interpretive philosophical stance and a qualitative approach to data gathering is particularly appropriate for this study. Neuman's (1997) and Hsieh and Wu's (2011) qualitative approach to data gathering for researches focusing on the interpretation of social reality is adopted for this study and as such, qualitative individual interviews were conducted as this is was argued in both researches to be the best data collection technique that best captures the essence of this qualitative approach. In total, 18 informants from Malaysia and Indonesia were interviewed (approximately 1 to 1½ hours for each interview session per respondent). Participation was voluntary. Concerns of privacy were assured and each participant was only recognised through their assigned pseudonyms. The study organizes collected interview data into manageable narratives, and carries out a careful, step-by-step analysis on the interpretive inquiries. Throughout the process of data collection, analysis of data occurred simultaneously at two levels – individual level and group level. At the individual level, data coding was conducted after each interview was recorded and transcribed. More specifically, the following two-step data coding procedure was employed: (i) First, open coding of related data was performed to organize data into conceptual stages of identity formation and self-esteem, such as awareness, exploratory, evaluation, immersion and confirmation; and (ii) Second, axial coding of the data was performed to identify more specific commonalities in each of the conceptual stages and to classify them into themes, such as social pressure and escapism. Analysis at the group level involved both researchers who conducted the interviews, in which both researchers met at intervals to share experiences, disseminate data, and discuss findings and insights. After each discussion, directions for further inquiry were made. Frequent communication among researchers facilitated an iterative cycle of collective sense-making and ensured the validity of the emergent themes. In addition, interpretations of the findings were also sought for interpretive verification by sending back findings to respondents. Also, interpretations of findings were discussed and sought for further verification among scholars with research interests in consumer identities and self-esteem (i.e. expert reviews).

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of this article is to understand how individuals who have a low self-identity and low self-esteem find a way to rebuild and regain their self-identity through anime as an avenue for identity formation. Five conceptual stages were identified and eight themes had emerged.

### 4.1 Awareness stage

The first stage provides insights on how individuals first identify the problem of low self-identity and low self-esteem.

#### 4.1.1 Social pressure

Findings show a non-conformance to societal standards and expectations as participants expressed feelings of being intimidated, inferior, pressured and dread to socialise. They suffer from relative oppression and face difficulties to step out into the society.

*I'm different from my male friends. I don't portray many of their characteristics, such as confidence, leadership, esteem etc. I'm always scared to talk. I actually freaked out when I'm with them! I feel very alien and will constantly think what I'm doing with a crowd of friends. I do not think mingling around is what I like and I often felt unconfident talking to girls.*

As an individual mingle around with their peers, a sense of peer pressure arises when an individual is not able to identify to the group. The feeling of out-casted took place, as the interactions in the actual world are not affirming to the individual's beliefs (i.e. it is something that individuals cannot identify themselves with), hence, the individual loses self-esteem as he has a lesser confidence to participate.

## 4.2 Exploratory stage

The second stage shed insights on how individuals went on with their lives in search of a social home that they are able to conform and identify with comfortably. Correspondingly, this is where individuals began to come into contact with anime.

### 4.2.1 Search

Individuals began to realize their low esteem orientations and sought alternative ways to feel good about themselves. The convenience and anonymity of the virtual world was observed to have provided these individuals with breathing and live spaces, in which the virtual world was identified as a comfortable platform for expression.

*In the beginning, I tried to search through few search engines to find a relevant virtual platform for me. The first site that actually strikes my mind was cartoon sites, as I always feel good when I was young watching cartoons.*

When probed further on what do they meant by "cartoons", a clear association to anime was found among this segment of individuals.

*During my generation after the millennium, most of the cartoons are considered as anime as they were mostly based on Japanese story lines. I was only occasionally exposed to those old school cartoons like Tom and Jerry and Mickey Mouse. Even American cartoons like Ben 10 have adopted the Japanese format of cartoon drawings and storylines, such as using equipments, in the case of Ben 10 – a watch, to transform to a superhero, unlike Batman and Superman which is just a change of costume.*

### 4.2.2 Escapism

Perceptions of comparison and being compared lead individuals to enact consumption practices such as escapism (from actual to virtual world) and the quest for virtual control. In addition to the Eastern culture, the ethos of emphasis on acceptance guides an individual's consumption behaviour. The motivation of this identity attempt is mainly to construct a positive acceptance and power, attempting to retrieve the confidence and respect lost in the actual world. Individuals hope that with a leadership state, they are able to shake off the effeminate stigmatization, and to find a sense of belonging and manhood (i.e. an identity), and negotiate for status to regain self-esteem. .

*After watching anime, I feel I am alive once again. I always imagine myself as the hero in the anime character. I am able to get what I wanted easily and to feel the power to lead. It is like a dream come true.*

## 4.3 Evaluation stage

The third stage shows how individuals took reflections on their lives and evaluate the opportunities offered through anime that is able to solve their problems of low self-identity and low self-esteem. At this stage, responses from respondents who were still evaluating the consumption of anime did not want to be associated with the anime group. These respondents mockingly added that they wanted to remain low profile and did not want to reveal their identity to the public. They are still assessing their inner character against the characters offered through anime before deciding on whether anime is really what they want to base their identity upon.

*I have actually considered portraying myself as being immersed into anime quietly, without telling anyone. I am afraid my friends find me weird, as they are already finding me weird, for not being able to relate to my male character role in the actual world. While watching anime, I evaluated my inner self, can I find my true self through anime and trying to identify myself with the lead character to see if I can feel being part of them.*

### 4.3.1 Dominance

According to Maslow (1954), there is a basic need for safety and this basic need must be fulfilled before an individual moves up the ladder of needs. Within the urban pressure, this is largely psychological; it boils down to feel confident, securing stability and consistency in a chaotic world. These individuals are not able to reach this stage, hence, they are unable to step their foot forward into the real world. Guided by Eastern family ties and the laden values of the traditional Eastern values and the search for identity construction attempt, the desire to be able to surmount and lead begin to develop. They dwell into the world of anime and use the petite and submissive character to uphold their inner low self-identity to coax their own self, that they once again exert the control and power, which delivers a sense of temporal achievements.

*I grew up in a conventional family where male plays a dominant part in a family; they are the leaders in the family. They make decisions, they're confident and the wife and children would listen to him. I feel I'm not able to live to my family expectations.*

*I'm a more chauvinist person, and I believe that male should be the dominant party in a relationship. In the actual world, male is no longer the dominant party, as female seek for equality too. It is interesting to see my ideal dominancy through the anime.*

#### 4.3.2 Materialism

A sense of materialism was also found through the narratives when respondents were evaluation the potential for identity formation through anime consumption. More specifically, low self-esteem men coupled with lack monetary stability are generally viewed as unconfident characteristics to approach girls and as a result, they rarely date, in which feelings of fear and uncertainty over-power them. Further, if a person lacks confident and certainty, they will become insecure and thus, resulting in low self-esteem. When a low self-esteem individual mingles around, they will point their finger and blame the other person. They may become deceptive and try to escape in order to attain the self-identity that they need to gain stability, which is an important survival skill. Hence, there is a self-defence mechanism that takes place.

*In the real world, women are materialistic; they always like to find men that are rich, drive a good car, fun to be with, full of energy etc. I don't possess any of these. I've difficulty surviving. I think it is difficult for me to find a girl that is good and submissive, and supports her man. But anime seems able to provide me with this. The characters seem to be very down-to-earth, humble, generous etc, of which all these falls into the ideal girl that is in my mind.*

#### 4.3.3 Confidence

The identity attempt during this exploratory stage is consonant with the social need and to avoid discrimination from society and feeling of being out-casted. The exploration stage in virtual anime world serves to protect them from the mainstream oppression and to maintain a sense of belonging. As such, these individuals inhibit consumption practices that express their inner urge to be dominant and confident whereby, they seek characters that are submissive.

*I don't feel confident about myself being a man; I'm scared to do many things in the real world. I feel lousy. I believe my actual self is not who I am now. I can find my true self in the anime world; it gives me control, confidence, and raises my self-esteem, through my virtual role of being the hero in the anime character. This is where I find my true self and I am happy with it.*

#### 4.4 Immersion stage

A critical juncture occurs when an individual makes the transition from the evaluation stage to immersion stage. Once these individual recognize that anime provides them with a sense of euphoria, consonance can only be achieved by identifying more with anime watching. During this stage, individuals have gone through identity acceptance and view anime as a normal way of life. Thus, in the immersion stage, individuals tend to believe that they have found their real self, and hence, reduce interactions with the mainstream society as means to minimize conflicts and non-conformance. Hence, increasing anime consumption validates and normalizes their quest to find their own identity. They describe the platform as a wonderful new world and to shake off the past of oppression and non-conformance.

*I used to think I am a typical loser. I believe I am an all-time big fat wuss. How can a girl like me? However, after exposure to anime, I realise I am very comfortable and feel appreciated consuming anime. I like to idolize myself as the hero and I always try to think I am him and I always enjoy how he carries himself in the anime character. I really am able to find my own true person. I really enjoy all the anime series. I am addicted to it. I am now, trying to dislodge myself from the real world.*

#### 4.5 Confirmation stage

The five stages present how individuals become confident of their new gained identity and the subsequent actions and behaviours following higher levels of self-esteem.

##### 4.5.1 Comfort

Individuals feel very much at ease with the immersion of their desired anime characters. They learn about the characters, understand how one should behave through the characters, and sub-consciously, they live their new identities as according to the character of the anime.

*When I compare how I feel when I am watching anime and how I feel when I am mingling with my friends, it is totally two different kinds of feeling altogether. I feel pressured and left out when I am with my friends, but I feel ecstatic and euphoric when I am watching anime; trying to follow closely how all the characters blends into my everyday life. I really like the feeling.*

##### 4.5.2 Tribal/Community

Through the above stages of identity construction attempt, individuals adopt consumption practices that are deemed appropriate to pursue their own identity-related activities and once again, feel the freedom as an accepted individual. The urge to remain in anime through the conformation of self-identity develops into a shared norm and the sub-cultural ethos is manifested in their social networking behaviour, where these individuals openly share their ideal characters in their own circle of community. At this juncture, coupled with the discrimination by the general society, individuals tend to reduce interactions with the society as a means to minimize conflicts and non-conformance. In contrast, increasing

involvement with the anime subculture validates and normalizes behaviour, whereby the tribal subculture provide individuals with support to cope with feelings of alienation and become eager to dichotomize themselves in the inner from others in outer social circles (Hsieh and Wu, 2011). Notably, desired products and brands begin to develop, such as costumes and dresses to dress like the anime characters which they think they are and in which they have based their identity upon. In other words, these individuals portray themselves through the use of certain possession of certain apparels or brands, thereby developing brand legitimacy and a detection protocol that carries with it symbolic and representation values.

*I tend to become more involved into the anime world, and try my best to find and be involved in anime gathering such as Cosplay where I can portray myself to be the character that resembles me; that is how I bring my inner-self out into the real world, and to become part of the society.*

## 5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present findings are based on a naturally occurring data; they offer a different perspective to understand how individual with identities that do not conform to societal standards and expectations are rebuilt and regain though anime as an avenue of identity reformation. According to Luhtanen and Crocker (1992), there is always a self enhancement tendency for every individual to behave according to social behaviour and cognition.

Theoretically, the findings of this research suggest that norm-conformity self leads to the reinstatement of self identity in the virtual world, which conforms to the self congruency theory and then, the ultimate product is the self identity reflection. They become “adherence” to an imposed societal ideal (of which without the conformity, the society will dising them). The aspiration to be similar to ideal men may stem from a desire to uphold a societal ideal; a subset of collective self-esteem that creates a positive feelings toward gender group and pride in being a man (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992). This is in line with the social identity theory when one feels about oneself as being a member of social groups (Tajfel, 1982).

The present study also suggests that anime lovers and consumption practices and behaviour reflect different psychological states and in response to social influence that once build the traditional value system among the Asian community. In other words, there is a temporarily sense of achieving conformity during a short period of escapism that boost up their confidence level. This is further confirmed by Young (2008) that individuals who suffer from low self-esteem, feels thrilled and fascinated about themselves when they are able to achieve their “intended” self. Young and socially awkward self-esteem individuals may find it easier to blend in the anime character than to risk the face-to-face rejection of a real person. As they become more immersed in the anime world, denial takes hold, and he views the anime characters as more real than an actual person. Hence, anime becomes a new way of escaping for them, without really dealing with the underlying actual problems.

Further, with frequent interactions amongst anime fans, the anime subculture’s influence on an individual increases and the adherence to anime sub-cultural values heightened, such as longing for freedom, self-expression, security, community, individualism) and becomes more evident in their consumption practices. Most of these anime fans organise cosplay events and gatherings and through these, these men immerse themselves more into absorbing anime sub-cultural norms and practices, and hence, drifted further away. Through the mingling and sharing, and the identity construction attempt amongst fellow members, individuals adopt consumption practices that are deemed appropriate for pursuing identity-related activities. This is in line with Turner (1996) where it was stipulated that in every subculture community, they will have their own consumption style. In this case, anime lovers need and exerts control and power through portrayal of cosplay has become a form of consumption reality.

## 6. MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the present study provides a richer and more nuanced description of anime fan consumption patterns, hence, provides an insight to marketers on their internal motivations to develop an effective anime lovers’ segmentation. On top of that, marketers can also build long-term relationships with anime customers by employing proactive approaches to anticipate their internal needs throughout the lifecycle. For instance, by organizing more anime events and to enlighten society that anime sub-culture has their own motivation and purpose. This sub-culture manifested in their consumption in cosplay, clothing, and grooming necessities. In order to target these consumers, marketers in the apparel, and grooming industries can establish antidiscrimination policies and promote the acceptance of diversity to build anime-friendly brand images that fit with their system of values, resulting in the formation of trust and emotional bonds.

From the perspective of managers, in order to gauge the collective mentality among consumers in general context and in Asian countries in particular, the phenomenon actually encourages individual consumers to interact with firms and other consumers so as to enhance relationships and generate loyalty-sustaining meaning (Cromie and Ewing, 2009; Tuten, 2005).

Another aspect to ponder is to gradually reducing the gap between the society and low self identity individuals, firms can project anime friendliness by sponsoring events, such as anime parades, to strengthen the emotional connection or

to sustain the relationship built in previous stages and for the society to accept this unique segment and to uphold them in their quest to build up their confidence level.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Through this study, the phenomenon illustrates how low-self identity individual builds their identity through exploration and consumption. With the progression to identity synthesis, these individuals develop a sense of self-acceptance as part of an integrated total identity. The pathway that each individual go through are very linear per say. We did not see identify any pendular progression amongst our respondents. The motivation of this identity attempt is mainly to construct a positive acceptance and power, attempting to retrieve the confidence and respect lost in the actual world.

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