

## Manga/anime Conventions in Poland: The Example of Japanicon 2015

Aleksandra Jaworowicz-Zimny

**Abstract:** Events organised for fans of Japanese culture are enjoying growing popularity all over the world. This research note examines the organisation of conventions in Poland, where the scale of such events is considerably smaller than in Western Europe. It focuses on the example of Japanicon 6 – a convention that took place in Poznań in October 2015 and the general activities of its organising company. A participants' survey reveals who the convention's visitors are, what aspects of Japanese culture they find most interesting, how they gain knowledge about Japan, and finally how visitors' profiles influence the way conventions in Poland are organised.

**アブストラクト：**現在、世界各地で、日本文化ファン向けのイベントが活発に開催されている。本稿では、西ヨーロッパ諸国における同様のイベントに比して、規模の小さいポーランドにおける日本文化ファン向けイベントの参加者の実態について、具体的事例としてJapanicon 6を取り上げ論じたものである。Japanicon 6は、ポーランド西部の都市・ポズナンにおいて、2015年10月に開催された。同イベントでの実地調査ならびに参加者へのアンケート調査の結果、Japanicon 6の参加者について、基本的な属性や、日本文化のこういった側面に参加者が関心を有しているのか、日本に関する知識をどのように得ているのか、などといった点を明らかにした。そのうえで、参加者の属性がポーランドにおける日本文化関連イベントの企画や構成にどのような影響を与えているのかについても論じた。

**Keywords:** anime, manga, conventions, leisure, Poland.

## Introduction

Amid the growing global popularity of Japanese pop culture, many countries now have fan events and conventions for fans of manga, anime and other aspects of Japanese popular culture. These events range from huge conventions – such as Japan Expo in Paris, which attracts over 200,000 visitors each year – to small-scale niche events attracting only a few tens or hundreds of people. This trend is also visible in Poland, where events for fans of the broad genres of fantasy, science fiction, games (including live action and traditional role-playing games) and Japanese culture are relatively popular. In 2015 there were more than thirty general fan events that catered to manga and anime fans, and twenty-one events dedicated only to manga, anime and Japanese culture (Informator Konwentowy 2015).

The manga and anime market in Poland can be dated back to the early 1990s, when the TV channel Polonia 1 began airing titles like *Yattaman*, *Captain Tsubasa* and *Tōshō Daimos* ('*Brave Leader Daimos*'). The first really popular title, however, was *Sailor Moon*, which was broadcast from 1995. Its popularity made possible the publication of the first Polish magazine dedicated to manga and anime, *Kawaii*, which was launched in 1997. With no widespread access to the Internet at the time, *Kawaii* was the heart of the first generation manga community in Poland. It became the main source of information about manga and anime titles and Japanese culture. It supported the community by publishing a pen pal column, advertising conventions and publishing articles disputing the criticisms of manga that were present in mainstream media until the late 1990s. A split in the editorial board and a drop in sales (resulting from greater access to the Internet rather than fans losing interest) meant that *Kawaii* ceased publication in 2005, but both the Polish manga market and the fandom kept growing nevertheless.

## Japanicon 2015

Four of the Japanese pop culture events in Poland, including the biggest one (Magnificon in Kraków), are organised by MiOhi, a one-person company based in Kraków and run by Marta Oleksy. Her involvement in organising events began in 2002. She is interested in Japanese pop culture herself and, inspired by other events she attended, organised her first convention at age eighteen for about 150 people (Oleksy 2015). While many (particularly one-off) events are organised by various fan groups or associations, in 2015 MiOhi was the only full-time Polish company organising manga/anime events and it has events in all the biggest cities nationwide. The conventions organised by MiOhi are: Magnificon in Kraków (around 3,500 participants), Japanicon in Poznań (around 2,500 participants), Love in Wrocław (for Valentine's Day, around 1,500 participants) and Mokon in Warsaw (around 1,500 participants). These conventions are yearly events and started in 2010, so each of them held their sixth event in 2015. When not organising her own events, Oleksy visits other conventions in Poland and abroad (particularly Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and runs a booth selling manga goods.

While Marta Oleksy is the only employee of MiOhi, every event is organised by about fifteen people, mostly from Kraków, but also local coordinators. MiOhi has organised similar events in other cities, like Gdańsk and Łódź, but there was not enough interest among fans. According to Oleksy, it is only worth organising an event in a particular city when 70 to 80 per cent of participants live in the area. In the above-mentioned cities, around 80 per cent of participants came

from other regions, so MiOhi decided not to repeat these events. While some people travel long distances to attend manga events, sometimes using the occasion for other sightseeing in the convention's host city, as indicated by the participants' survey discussed below most attendees at MiOhi events are locals and convention attendance resembles leisure more than tourism.<sup>1</sup>

I attended the sixth Japanicon event in Poznań on 10-11 October 2015 at the Józef Tischner General Education School Complex. Apart from the biggest events – such as the multigenre fantasy convention Pyrkon in Poznań, which attracts over 30,000 people – Polish conventions are held mostly at schools for the simple reasons of availability and the cost. Usually no events other than elections are organised on weekends at schools, so on most Saturdays and Sundays these buildings can be rented out to convention organisers. Also the cost is much lower than major convention centres.

According to the organisers, Japanicon uses a standard format and the organisation is basically the same at each event. Although Japanicon 2015 did not start until 9 am on Saturday 10 October, the preparations began around 5 pm on the Friday. The school was officially handed over to MiOhi for the weekend and the organising team, which had arrived by bus from Kraków, started setting up the event. Not much equipment was necessary. Another advantage of using a school is having computers, projectors and speakers in every room that can be freely used. The rest of the equipment – including big screens, the sound system, gaming consoles and dancing pads for music video games – was brought by the organisers from Kraków and placed in dedicated classrooms on the Friday evening.

The MiOhi organising team at Japanicon consisted only of about twelve people, but 'helpers' also play a big role during the preparation of events. Around fifty volunteers took part in Japanicon. They did not pay the entrance fee, but supported the organisers throughout the event. The helpers began work on Friday by carrying the chairs, tables and other equipment to designated places or pinning up posters; during the event they helped look after participants; and afterwards they helped to clean up the school. They were mostly manga/anime fans between fifteen (no younger people are allowed) and nineteen.

The participants started arriving on Friday evening. People who lived more than 150 kilometres from Poznań were allowed to come to the convention earlier and stay over on the Friday night, while all other attendees came on the Saturday morning and stayed at the convention only on Saturday night. Attendees stayed in 'sleep rooms', empty classrooms where participants could lay down mattresses and sleeping bags. That was the option used by most participants, and even many people living in Poznań decided to stay at the convention rather than to return home for the night.

Another group that arrived early was the manga publishers and vendors, who started setting up their booths in the hall right next to the main school entrance early in the evening. All the main manga publishers in Poland were present at Japanicon, except for Hanami (a company that targets adult readers) and Dango (the youngest Polish publisher that had only just been established). Several booths selling goods like pins, posters, T-shirts, mouse pads, coasters, key chains and figurines were also present. However, food was relatively hard to find. One booth next to the booths selling anime goods offered Japanese snacks, like Pocky (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>2</sup> There was also a small sushi corner, and *taiyaki*, tapioca bubble tea and brownie booths. Most participants either brought their own food or bought sandwiches in the school cafeteria.

The main event begun at 9 am on Saturday. People who pre-ordered tickets could get in faster (and cheaper – 45 złoty, around 1,400 yen, for two days). Those without tickets needed to wait up to four hours to get registered and enter the convention (their fee was 55 złoty, around 1,700 yen). The organisers said that compared to other cities, normally few people in Poznań purchase tickets in advance. At Japanicon 2015, about 1,100 tickets were pre-sold. The participants waiting in the long



Figure 1 (left): Manga published in Polish

Figure 2 (middle): Japanese sweets sold at Japanicon

Figure 3 (right): The queue outside Japanicon 2015

queue (Figure 3) said, however, that for many of them it was a deliberate strategy. They did not want to enter the convention too quickly because the queue is a place to socialise. People have time to talk to each other, dance, play musical instruments, and take pictures with cosplayers. By the time they enter the actual event, they have become friends with many people and this lets them enjoy the convention more than if they had entered the building with pre-purchased tickets.

Tickets to most Polish conventions can be pre-ordered via Nagato-system. All Polish conventions organisers use this webpage to register their events and sell entrance tickets, while helpers, publishers and vendors can contact event organisers and offer to help or book vendor spaces. The system also keeps all people involved updated about the status of the event.

During Japanicon 2015 there were eighteen rooms providing different types of attractions. Eight rooms were dedicated to various activities including traditional Japanese games, console games, karaoke, the rhythm game *osu!*, the dance video game *DDR*, origami, and kanji writing. There were quizzes in two rooms (for example, recognising voice actors or opening songs, and *One Piece* knowledge). In the remaining six rooms there were various presentations, including about student life in Japan, Japanese mythology, anime from the 1970s, and the reasons why soon-to-be-released computer RPG game *Fallout 4* would be a disappointment. One room was used by the Third Mercenary Japanese Infantry Division (Trzeci Najemny Oddział Piechoty Japońskiej), a historical re-enactment group specialising in battles from fifteenth and sixteenth century Japan. While the main activity of this group of Sengoku (Warring States) Period enthusiasts is staging historical re-enactments, at Japanicon they organised several presentations and workshops. Finally, the biggest room (the gym) was where the main events took place, including cosplay, idol concerts and anime music video contests. Apart from the musical attractions, like karaoke and rock band games (where the player pretends to play musical instruments), there was no night break. The contests and presentations continued from the Saturday morning all through the night until Sunday at noon.



*Figure 4: Main hall with merchandise booths*

On the Saturday evening in the main room there was a concert by LeChat. This relatively unknown Japanese idol, dressed-up as an anime character, performed anime and Vocaloid songs. Later during the night there was the final of the Polish Anime Music Videos contest (KTA2K15), featuring montages of anime scenes with music, often created with professional video editing software.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main attractions that encouraged people to come to Japanicon was cosplay. It was a preliminary selection round for the Japan Expo 2016 cosplay contest and supervised by one of the French organisers. Many people dressed up just for fun and enjoyed walking around as their favourite character, or perhaps just in a costume that was easy to make. Others took part in the less formal cosplay show, and thirteen groups competed for the right to attend the European Cosplay Gathering as part of Japan Expo in Paris. In the questionnaire conducted among Japanicon 2015 attendees, 34 out of 554 respondents listed cosplay among their main reasons for coming to Japanicon. For the cosplayers, taking pictures together and having their pictures taken by others were key attractions. Many Polish cosplayers come to such events already in their costumes, so they also walk around the city in their outfits. They do not mind having their pictures taken and posted on social media. Japanicon even had an official photo studio, where participants could have professional pictures of them taken and then posted on the event's Facebook page. The event's fan page is full of pictures uploaded by participants, often by people looking for the contact details of the cosplayers in the pictures.

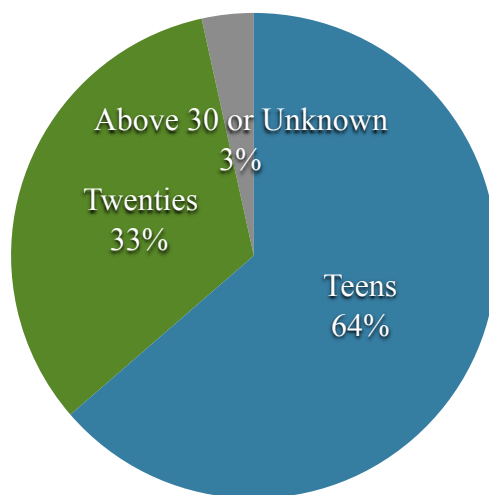


*Figure 5: Fans enjoying the cosplay show*

## Participant Survey at Japanicon 2015

During Japanicon, I carried out a survey of participants and attendees. Questionnaires were handed out to people standing in the queue to enter the event on the Saturday morning and afternoon, so most answers were given before visitors had entered the actual event. Almost all the waiting participants were asked to fill out the survey. Most people approached readily agreed and many even asked for questionnaires when they saw others filling it out. In total, 554 people out of about 2,300 participants (helpers and organisers included) filled out the questionnaire (excluding incomplete ones). This sample (24 per cent of the total number of participants) can be assumed to provide a broadly representative picture of the participants at the event.

The survey was divided into two main parts: the first asked about the reasons and details of their visit to Japanicon, and the second investigated in more general terms their interest in Japan. Of the 554 respondents, all had Polish nationality and a slight majority were female (245 males vs. 293 female, plus 16 of unknown gender). As seen in Figure 6, the vast majority of participants were in their teens and twenties.

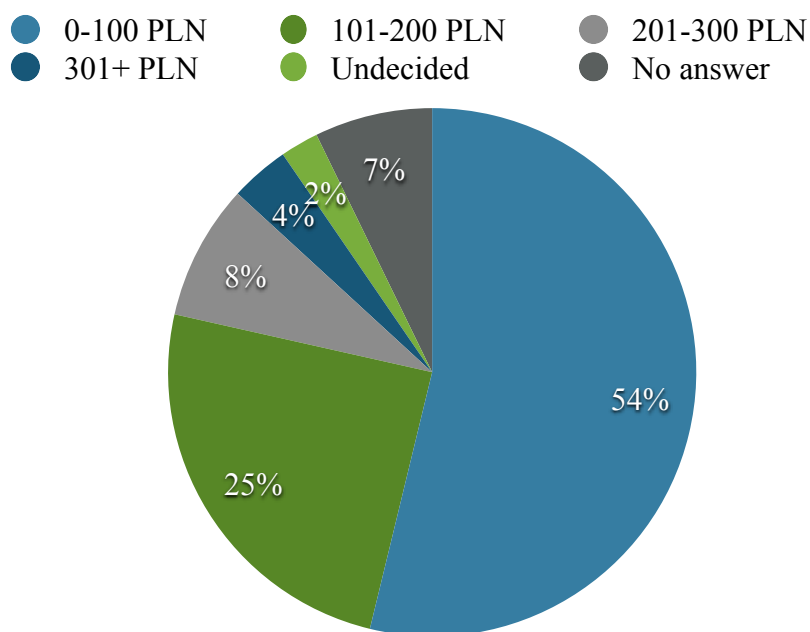


*Figure 6: The ages of participants at Japanicon 2015 (554 respondents)*

Given that 64 per cent of respondents were in their teens, Japanicon was an event enjoyed mostly by young people. Some people in their early twenties even said they were ‘getting too old for this’, and expressed doubt if they would come back the following year. The young age of participants is consistent with the profile of the ‘representative manga reader’ in Poland created by publishing house Waneko, which assumes around 70 per cent of its readers are under 18 (Świderski 2015). The statement about ‘being too old’ for manga events seems to hold for many people’s interests in manga in general, too. According to representatives of both the Waneko and Kirin publishing houses (that publish manga and books about Japan), many manga fans turn at some point to American comic books, or develop a deeper interest in other aspects of Japan, or just move into grown-up life and leave manga behind as part of their teenage years (Świderski 2015; Wosińska 2015).

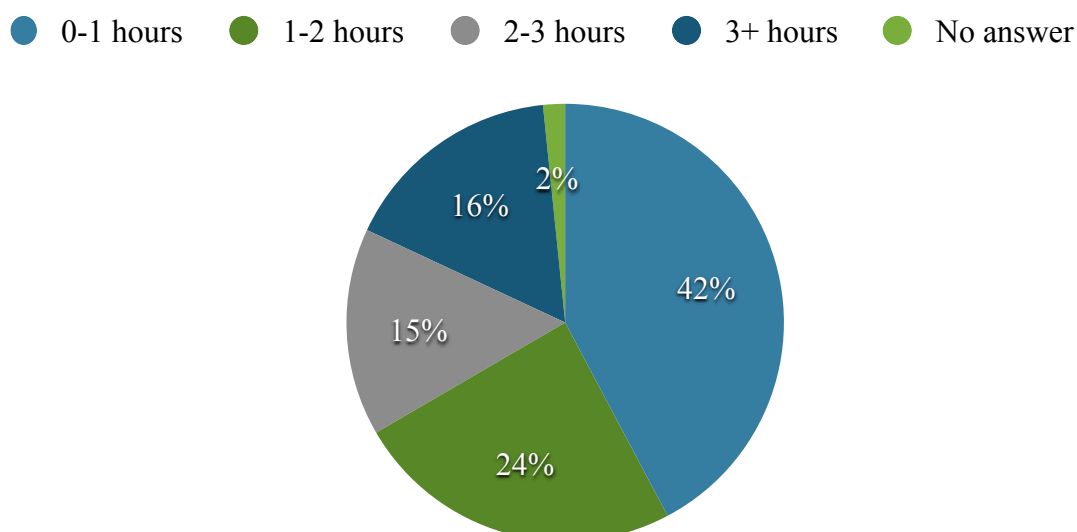
As most attendees are relatively young, most also have a limited budget. The majority of Japanicon visitors depend on money given by their parents. As shown in Figure 7, more than half of participants were planning on spending up to 100 złoty (3,000 yen), and only about 4 per cent were planning to spend more than 300 złoty (9,000 yen). The participants’ young ages and financial

dependence influence other answers. For example, close to three-quarters of participants used public transportation, which is cheaper than private transportation and does not require a driving license or a car.



*Figure 7: Planned expenditure at Japanicon 2015 (554 respondents)*

The final issue related to the young age of participants and their limited financial means is the fact that most of them lived relatively near to the convention's venue. Since written parental consent for underage participants is necessary in addition to financial support, young visitors are more likely to be allowed to attend the event if participation does not require long and relatively expensive travel. As demonstrated by the time necessary to get to Japanicon (Figure 8), the majority of participants lived in the region. A few people even mentioned that the convention being organised nearby was one of their main reasons for visiting it, and others said it was a reason to come back again in the future. Consequently, MiOhi's strategy to organise events in cities where locals are interested in manga and not to rely on people from other regions seems logical.



*Figure 8: Time taken to get to Japanicon (554 respondents)*

The second half of the questionnaire focused on attendees' broader interests in Japan. Respondents were asked to rate their interest in different areas of Japanese culture from 1 (not interested) to 5 (very interested). The average ratings (554 respondents) are presented in Figure 9.

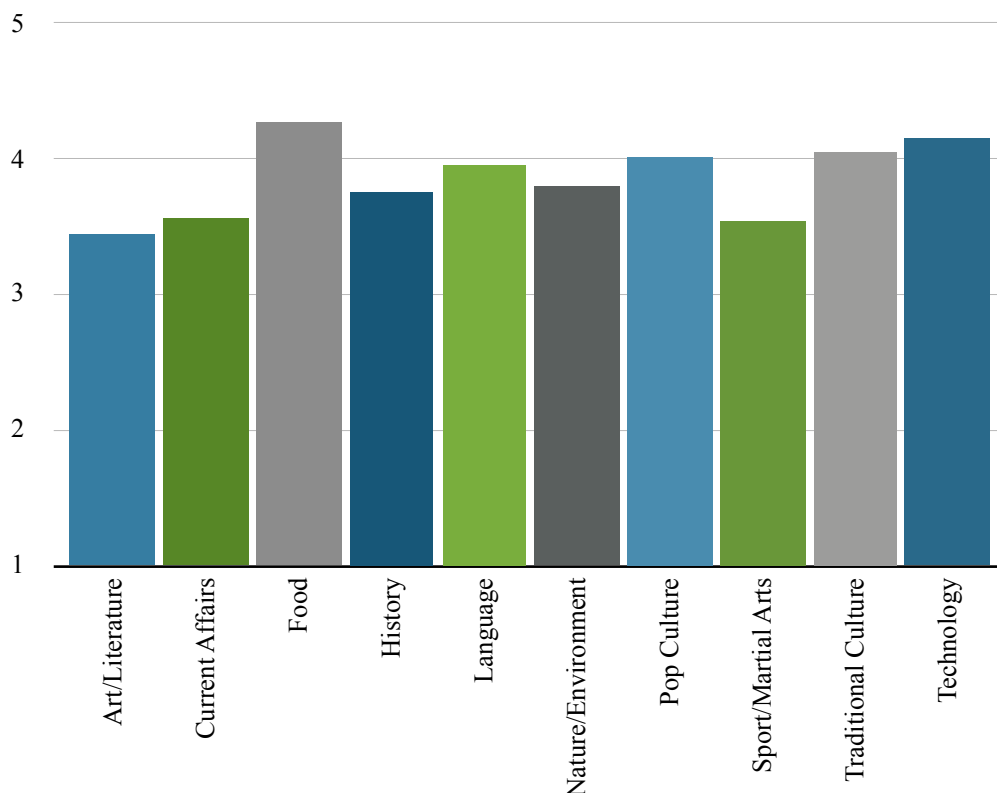


Figure 9: Levels of interest in various aspects of Japan

The interests getting the most attention were food, technology, traditional culture and pop culture. In the next question, respondents gave additional information about their interests. This question revealed big interest in and knowledge about Japanese popular culture. While many declared an interest in technology and food, they seemed to know most about Japanese entertainment. Many Japanese bands (One Ok Rock, Baby Metal, The Gazette) and manga artists (Eiichiro Oda, Masashi Kishimoto) were listed. Fans were also interested in voice actors (*seiyū*, such as Kamiya Hiroshi) and novelist Haruki Murakami, who is very popular in Poland. Some newer trends were evident, too. Some Japanicon visitors said they were listening to Vocaloid songs and cover versions published on the Internet by popular *utaite*, amateur singers who put their performances of already released songs on YouTube or the Nico Nico Dōga video-sharing site. Only a few people listed things related to more traditional aspects of Japanese culture, including the samurai and Edo culture, tea ceremony, martial arts and blade weapons. Overall, the majority of Japanicon participants seem to be first and foremost consumers of popular culture, and their general interest in Japan came second.

This conclusion is supported by another feature of the survey results. Some of the fans did not distinguish clearly between Japanese and Korean pop culture. Some fans listed among their favourite musicians bands like BigBang, Exo or Shinee, even though these are Korean artists. Respondents were either unaware of or did not mind the fact that these artists were from a different country. Publishers have also noticed this trend. Yumegari publishes a variety of *manhwa* (Korean

comics) and *manhua* (Chinese comics) alongside its Japanese manga, and according to their observations readers decide to buy a comic book based on its story and drawings rather than its country of origin (Izdebska-Filipiak 2015).

What is clearly visible in respondents' answers is the fact that while having rather limited access to both printed information about Japan and legal sources of Japanese pop cultural products, they remain highly up-to-date about popular artists and trends in Japan, especially those visible online, such as Vocaloids, *utaite* and web comics. In other words, although the manga publishing market is growing, the Polish fandom is concentrated around the Internet. Manga scanlations and anime fansub sites are booming, while Facebook pages dedicated to Japan and Japanese culture have thousands of followers. The symbiosis of the Polish manga market and Internet is a phenomenon that was broadly discussed by Świdorski (2015) from Waneko publishing house. Publishers often refer to scanlation or anime streaming sites to pick new titles based on their Internet popularity, which generates sales after the title gets published. Discussion about the publishing strategies within the Polish manga market is a subject requiring further research.

Only about a dozen respondents had visited Japan, but almost all of them were interested in going. Some even had very precise plans. Out of the 423 people who answered the question about planned activities in Japan, 114 said they simply wanted to go sightseeing, but 46 were thinking of studying and/or living there for good, even though only two of these people had been to Japan before. Alongside fairly mainstream plans like visiting Tokyo, Kyoto or climbing Mt. Fuji, the image of 'weird Japan' and things that had gone viral on social media were also included in fans' sightseeing plans. Tashirojima ('cats island'), Aokigahara (known as 'suicide forest'), a toilet exhibition in Miraikan Museum in Tokyo, a seven-floor sex shop in Akihabara, a 'perverted sex club' or just a 'perverted place', even Japanese vending machines were listed among attractions that respondents wanted to see. 'Weird Japan', a common form of narrative in Polish mainstream and social media, has effectively become a form of contents stimulating interest in travel to particular locations. It is promoted by blogs, YouTube channels (one belonging to Krzysztof Gonciarz was mentioned by a number of respondents) and online articles (see for example Baranowska 2014). Judging by the survey results, for many fans sensationalist content appears to be more influential on their travel interests than texts about Japan written by specialists.

Pop culture also featured as a key motivation for wanting to visit Japan. While over 100 respondents expressed only a vague desire to 'sightsee' in Japan and another 50 wanted to do 'everything', some respondents named the type of activities they were interested in doing in Japan. Forty-two people were particularly interested in activities related to pop culture, such as visiting the Ghibli or *Shōnen Jump* museums, going to anime and game centres, buying goods, seeing anime sites, helping in anime production, learning how to draw manga, becoming *seiyū* (voice artists), visiting Japanese conventions and going to concerts in Japan. These people seem well-informed about the type of activities available for fans. While they do not exclude other activities, like more general sightseeing or trying Japanese food, their interest in Japanese pop culture can be considered a primary motivation for any future visits to Japan.

However, why are young people so fascinated with Japanese pop culture? Based on the survey results, two key issues seem to be relevant. The first is that the culture is 'different' (distinguishing it from other European or American productions); the second is the social aspect of belonging to the manga fandom in Poland. No respondent explained the nature of the 'difference' – seeing Japanese culture as different and unique seems to be a cliché that has become received wisdom.<sup>4</sup> Even though the manga market is growing and some anime can be watched on Poland's approximately 50 free-to-view television channels, Japanese pop culture seems not to be considered 'mainstream'. Consequently, it attracts people seeking an 'original hobby', as one respondent stated. Regarding

social aspects, more than a quarter of Japanicon visitors stated that spending time with friends and meeting new, 'alike' people were the main reasons for coming. Moreover, 20 per cent of respondents became interested in Japan through the influence of friends or family. In short, manga connects people. Fans at conventions become friends quickly, spontaneously talk to each other, offer free hugs, join other people's conversations, and are generally allowed to be themselves – open, friendly, a bit 'crazy', extremely direct and honest about who they are. This atmosphere generated by being surrounded by similar people is not something that can necessarily be enjoyed in everyday life. It featured in the survey as one of the major reasons why people wanted to come to Japanicon again in the future.

There has been no major study conducted about the Polish manga fandom, only small surveys in short articles on manga fanpages. It can be assumed, however, that while the popularity of manga lies partly in an interest in Japanese popular culture, there is also this factor of connecting people who feel they do not fully fit in, who are outsiders looking for something different, and who consider themselves not to be so mainstream. Japanicon visitors in the survey praised the convention's atmosphere and tolerance. According to another survey conducted on the biggest Polish Facebook fanpage, the highest number of respondents thought of manga as a means of escapism (Kruczek 2015). Also Marcin Grzybowski, in an article about different groups interested in manga, mentioned that some young people having difficulties in real life seek help via their hobby (Grzybowski 2005). However, the more extreme examples of troubled teenagers aside, the basic rule seems to be clear: fans of Japanese pop culture are first and foremost people attracted to things that are 'different', and are mostly young people celebrating their individualism in opposition to mainstream culture. In spite of a growing manga market, so-called 'Chinese cartoons' (an expression broadly used in Polish for anime, which is now mostly used ironically but was popular in the 1990s when many people did not distinct Japan and China and assumed anime to be of Chinese production) still do not belong to Polish mainstream culture. The fandom is a relatively liberal environment in which there is respect for other people's individuality.

One final category of attendee emerged within the survey: convention fans. About ten per cent of respondents said they had visited ten or more events related to Japan, and the highest number of conventions attended by any one individual was around seventy. These people, who are slightly older than the average Japanicon participants, travel all over the country from one event to another, not necessarily related only to Japanese culture. While their answers in the questionnaires indicate they have an interest in Japan, their goal in attending such events seems to be simply having fun at the event 'because it is a convention'. As one person answered: 'conventions are my life'.

## **Conclusions**

The survey carried out at Japanicon 2015 illuminates the important role of manga in Poland in both creating and shaping a fan community. Manga fans are mainly young people in their teens and twenties who are interested primarily in Japanese pop culture, and only secondarily in Japan in general. They obtain their information about their interests mostly from the Internet. However, in a domestic Polish context, their limited financial resources mean that their travel behaviour conforms more to patterns of leisure than 'contents tourism'. Japanese pop culture conventions in Poland are targeted at a local fandom and are held in cities where a large enough number of people interested in such Japanese pop culture events live.

However, while the survey has indicated the limited power of conventions in Poland to trigger significant domestic tourism (and in the case of Japanicon 2015 the tourism benefits in terms of

accommodation are reduced even further by attendees sleeping within the convention venue rather than in local hotels or other accommodation), the number of respondents who expressed an interest in visiting Japan also suggests that the conventions play a role in creating a large pool of potential future visitors to Japan whose interest in the country is rooted in the pop culture they enjoyed in their teens.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Leisure, as defined by Dumazedier, is 'activity - apart from the obligations of work, family, and society - to which the individual turns to at will, for either relaxation, diversion, or broadening his knowledge and his spontaneous social participation, the free exercise of his creative capacity' (1974, p. 133). This description fits the behaviour of most Japanicon participants because they are not travelling long distances to attend the event. Tourism, by contrast, is defined more in terms of distance travelled. Smith (1988, p. 183) defined tourism as 'the aggregate of all businesses that directly provide goods or services to facilitate business, pleasure and leisure activities away from the home environment'. MiOhi consciously plans its events without consideration of their tourism potential and targets locals. Even though MiOhi conventions are not planned and marketed as events targeting tourists, a number of Japanicon participants were engaged in event tourism, defined by Donald Getz as 'a market segment consisting of those people who travel to attend events or who can be motivated to attend events while away from home' (Getz 1997, p. 16). These are the respondents who would not have travelled the distance from their homes to Poznań on these days without an active choice to attend the convention. Overall, while events like Japanicon in Poland generate event tourism on a small scale, the survey reveals that most attendees are locals and avoid travelling long distances for this type of event.

<sup>2</sup> Pocky is a long, chocolate-covered biscuit, which is very well known and liked among Polish manga fans, although not available in regular shops.

<sup>3</sup> Participating AMVs can be watched at: <http://kta.net.pl/konkurs-teledyskow-anime/final-cta2k15-theoblivion6277-vs-duczman/> [Accessed 22 December 2015].

<sup>4</sup> The widespread stereotype of Japan being 'different' is the subject of a recent book by Arkadiusz Jabłoński (2015). Jabłoński, a professor at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, also runs a Facebook page discussing Polish press articles, Internet and TV news that present twisted facts about 'exotic Japan': <https://www.facebook.com/JaponskiMiszmasz/?fref=ts> [Accessed 23 February 2016].

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**Aleksandra Jaworowicz-Zimny** is a PhD candidate in the Graduate School of Education, Hokkaido University. Her research focuses on representations of war in youth and subcultures in Japan. Her email is [Jaworowicz-zimny@eis.hokudai.ac.jp](mailto:Jaworowicz-zimny@eis.hokudai.ac.jp)

Aleksandra Jaworowicz-Zimny (北海道大学教育学院博士後期課程)。日本の若者文化ならびにサブカルチャーにおける戦争の表象に注目した研究を行っている。Email: [Jaworowicz-zimny@eis.hokudai.ac.jp](mailto:Jaworowicz-zimny@eis.hokudai.ac.jp)

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