

# The Fun and Sustainability of Live Music

Masae Yoshimitsu  
University of Nagasaki, JAPAN

## 1 Introduction

Popular music research has noted that the importance of live concerts has increased over the years. The decline in overall music industry revenues due to the widespread use of the Internet has been compensated for by digital distribution and live concerts. The COVID-19 pandemic from January 2020 forced many live concerts to be canceled or postponed. Online concerts were also held, but in-person concerts were quickly revived in Japan.

According to a survey conducted by the Japan Concert Promoters Association in 2021, the number of performances at halls in 2021 has recovered to pre-2019 levels. The number of performances in arenas, stadiums, and live houses has also recovered to 60% of pre-2019 levels. The number of performances by overseas artists has begun to recover, although it is still less than 20% pre-2019 levels (Concert Promoters Association of Japan 2021). In 2022, Japan also saw an early recovery of in-person concerts at large venues such as at the Tokyo Dome (PIA Research Institute 2022).

This early recovery of in-person concerts in Japan may be due to the strong and sustainable attachment and communal nature of Japanese fans to the performers and fandom. Some previous studies have pointed these out (Yano 2004; Galbraith 2016), which will be discussed in the next section. The purpose of this study is to examine how sustainable communalities between performers and fandom are constructed in live concerts in Japan after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following is an overview of the study. First, this study presents a theoretical perspective, referring primarily to fandom studies. Next, the results of a qualitative study conducted with live concertgoers at a stadium concert in Japan will be described. Finally, overall conclusions are presented.

## 2 Previous Studies

### 2-1 Reference Group Function of Fandom

In this section, research on live concert fandom in Japan is examined. According to Jenkins, a leading fandom researcher, fans differ from the average consumer in that fans are loyal to a particular fan community (Jenkins 1992). Whenever fans act as fans, they refer to the norms of the fan community and compare themselves to other fans. Merton points out that the function of the compliant group is to value oneself by comparing one's status with others as well as acquiring norms (Merton 1968). This would correspond to the perspective of reference group behavior raised by the sociologist Merton.

Japanese consumer behavior theory also discusses fandom as a "reference group" of consumption (Iwasaki 2014). Japanese fans meet other fans at live concerts to build vast networks. Live concerts are also a gathering place for fans living in other regions. Fans coordinate their schedules with other fans to determine the location of concerts they attend (Iwasaki 2014). In addition, it has become customary for fans to compete in terms of the number of live concerts they attend and the quality of their seats. The term "*sansen*," which means "to join the fight," is used to describe attending a concert. According to Kouda and Dai fans who can go to hard-to-get concerts are the winners of the ticket wars, and as a result, they feel that their status is "elevated" in the fandom (Kouda and Dai 2018). From the above, it can be said that fandom functions as a compliant group that supplies behavioral norms and points of comparison to its fans.

## 2-2 The Construction of Fandom Community in Japanese Live Concerts

How has the communality between performers and fandom been discussed in studies of live concerts in Japan? Yano's field research revealed that the most important behavior for Japanese entertainers' fan activities is to belong to fan clubs and attend fan meetings (Yano 2004). Fan meetings are special live concerts that only paid official fan club members can attend. According to Yano, fan club affiliation and fan meeting participation foster a special sense of emotional bonding called *uchi* (insider identification) (Yano 2004). This special sense of community is reinforced by the fusion of interactive communication in which fans wave penlights and official merchandise in response to the stage performance. Yano calls this "the spectacle of intimacy" (Yano 2004). Yano pointed out that when a star "cries" while singing on stage, it increases fans' emotional attachment to the star (Yano 2004). While these cheering goods also serve an important function in the "spectacle of intimacy" (Yano 2004), they are also collected as proof of one's credibility as a fan and communality to the fandom. Galbraith calls these interactive performances between fans and performers at live concerts "labor of love" and considers them "the key to the sustainability of Japanese entertainment" (Galbraith 2016).

According to Galbraith, idols maintain a "closer, friendlier relationship" (Galbraith 2016) with fans who repeatedly attend live concerts. This special communality between performers and fandom is perhaps the key to the sustainability of live concerts in Japan.

## 3 Research Method

### 3-1 Research Questions

As indicated above, the early recovery of face-to-face live concerts in Japan after the COVID-19 pandemic may be since they are still special places today. Its function as a special place is to build a reference group function through the physical gathering and interaction of fans, and to build a sense of unity and communality with the performers during the live concert. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, these difficulties may be assumed.

The research questions of this study are: how does fandom reference group function in actual post-COVID-19 pandemic live concerts and how are emotions created during live concerts? To clarify these questions, the following research items were developed.

The first research question concerns the fandom's reference group functions regarding: a) covid-19 infection prevention compliance at live concert venues, and b) the purchase and wearing of official merchandise.

a) What are the covid-19 infection prevention measures at live concerts in Japan and how do audiences comply with them?

b) The purchase and wearing of official merchandise are essential for the "spectacle of intimacy" (Yano 2004) and "labor of love" (Galbraith 2016); how have the methods of purchasing and wearing official merchandise changed during the period when physically attending live concerts as not possible due to the spread of covid-19 infection?

The second research question concerns the construction of communality at live concerts. How is the *uchi* (insider identification) (Yano 2004) of special communality constructed in Japanese live concerts? How is the emotional bond between performers and fans constructed through "spectacles of intimacy" (Yano 2004) and "labor of love" (Galbraith 2016)? After the COVID-19 pandemic, handshakes and call-and-response between performers and fans were banned. What could replace them to create a sense of unity among fans?

### 3-2 Survey Method

This section describes the research methodology. This concerns participation in in-person concerts in arenas and domes in Japan between December 2021 and June 2022. In this study, we conducted an interview survey of the participants of live concerts held at some arenas and domes, using the research question presented in the previous section. Specific venues are Tokyo Dome and Kyocera Dome, with a capacity of approximately 50,000 people, and Marine Messe Fukuoka, with a capacity of approximately 10,000 people. The survey period was from May to June 2022, and the research participants were 12 adolescents in their 20s. In total two hours of interviews were conducted with the 12 research participants focusing on qualitative research techniques, looking at photos taken at the venue, online news about the concert, and official videos. The content of the interviews was confirmed two to three times for a deeper discourse analysis. This survey was conducted as part of a series of interviews on live

entertainment that has been conducted since 2020. Therefore, a good rapport was established with the research participants.

The research participants, all of whom are in their early 20s, have been frequent attendees of live concerts since they were teenagers. Therefore, this study concluded that they were fully capable of pointing out the changes in live concerts in Japan after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The live concerts analyzed in this study are in the following four genres that are popular among Japanese youth and have different characteristics: Japanese rock band, social media Singer, Johnny's Group (Japan's leading boy band), and K-pop group.

## 4 Results

### 4-1 Fandom's Reference Group Behavior, Common to Japanese Live Concerts

#### a) Covid-19 Infection Prevention Compliance Behavior

A common fandom reference group behavior common to all Japanese live concerts covered by this study would be adherence to thorough infection prevention regulations. All 12 research participants mentioned that they could not enter the venue without doing three things: wearing a mask, installing the "Cocoa" smartphone app, and taking their body temperature at the entrance.

If these regulations were broken, no one would be allowed to enter the venue, and all complied. From the above, it may be pointed out that compliance with infection prevention regulations made possible the early revival of live concerts in Japan.

#### b) Purchase and Use of Official Goods

When attending a live concert in Japan, it is very important to purchase and wear official supporting merchandise. The "spectacle of intimacy" (Yano 2004) and "labor of love" (Galbraith 2016) to create a sense of "*uchi*" are possible when everyone purchases official merchandise and performs the same dance. In recent Japanese concerts, the purchase of up-to-date penlights is essential, as the stage lighting is linked to official merchandise such as penlights.

How have the methods of purchasing and wearing official merchandise changed during the time that live concerts were not possible due to the spread of covid-19 infection? An online reservation system for official merchandise was introduced across genres to prevent long lines at venues.

### 4-2 The Construction of Sustainable Communities in Fandom

This section will examine how the sustainable community of performers and fandom is constructed in each case study. As indicated earlier, interactive communication between the performers on stage and the fans is important. It is quite possible that this may have changed during the period when live concerts could not be held due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These points will be discussed, referring to excerpts from the interviews with the research participants. Each interview excerpt will include the age and occupation of the research participant at the time of the interview, along with the genre of live concert mentioned by the research participant.

#### (1) Spectacle of Love's Light

The spectacle of light was noted as being moving at all the concerts attended by the research participants interviewed for this report.

Rock band, age 21 student: I was happy to see everyone wearing the clock-shaped lights, which are official goods.

K-pop group, age 20 student: I was happy to be able to use the official penlights for the first time in a long time. The Tokyo Dome, dyed in yellow green, was the most moving experience.

Rock band, age 20 student: I was moved to see all the fans in the venue turning on their smart phone lights during the encore when the lights went out.

In the absence of official goods such as penlights, smartphone lights were used. The spectacle of light is still essential for live concerts in Japan, even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social Media Singer, age 21 student: The balloon ride took us around the Tokyo Dome. It was nice to see them up close and wave to them.

Johnny's Group, age 22 company employee: The Ferris wheel ride was very typical of the Johnny's. There was also a "moving stage" and a "crane," so fans sitting in the back rows or near the ceiling of the Tokyo Dome could also get fan service.

At the concerts of Johnny's Group, no matter how huge the concert venue, there are diverse arrangements so that the performers can get close to the fans. Fans communicate with performers using official *uchiwa* (Japanese hand fans for cheering) and handmade *uchiwa* with messages written on them. The official *uchiwa* is a picture of the performer's face with a handle attached. When a performer finds a fan holding an *uchiwa* of their own face from the stage, they go up to the fan and says whatever words the fan wishes to hear. Thus, even without speaking out loud, active communication is taking place after the disaster using *uchiwa*.

Johnny's Group, age 26 company employee: It is common practice for fans to use official *uchiwa* without removing the plastic bag. But I was annoyed that there were fans who were using them with the plastic bag removed.

The irritation expressed by the research participants here may be due to fears of a change in fandom due to the increase in new fans. The Johnny's Group has banned performers from using social media. Communication between performers and fans has been limited to performance venues. However, because of their efforts to publicize via social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, more people became fans through social media. This will prove to be a source of frustration for old fans.

## (2) Producing Sustainable Ties between Performers and Fans

The performers' discographies were presented as a commemorative history that the performers and their fans have shared together. This section will focus on cases where topics and images related to "family" are used in stage directions.

Rock band, age 21 student: It was a performance befitting of the "10th Anniversary Concert. It was good that the concert started with the debut song, and that the live performance by a ceremonial orchestra gave the audience a solemn feeling. When the female members talked about their efforts to raise their children, the whole venue was filled with happiness.

The concert this research participant attended was a 10th anniversary concert for fan club members only. The festive sense of ritual was designed to heightened emotions. The fact that personal episodes were shared with fans probably imparted a sense of familial happiness and community to the fandom.

It has been shown in previous studies that the sharing of emotions creates a bond between performers and fans. As seen in previous studies, "crying" increases the cohesiveness of the fandom.

Social Media Singer, age 21 student: I was happy to see a performer who told me that he had been hospitalized until one week before going on stage, and that he had really worked hard for us. I was glad to see him before he went on hiatus. I hope he continues to be alive and well.

The above are the impressions of a well-known singer who performs music on social media as a "recluse" with social phobia. The COVID-19 pandemic made it possible for him to go on stage because the audience also wore masks, but the activity made their illness worse. As a result, the activity was suspended, and the singer went into long-term recuperation. Many fans also wore "*jirai-kei*(mine-type)" clothing and makeup, a modern version of Gothic Lolita, which expresses emotional pain in fashion. The audience must have experienced a strong sense of unity between the performers and fans expressing emotional pain.

K-pop group, age 20 student: For the encore, there was a surprise event by the venue staff. There was a compilation of memorable scenes from the group's Japanese activities since their debut in Japan. Love comments from many Japanese fans were also compiled. They said how much they missed seeing us and how sorry they were that we didn't have a concert. As soon as the members who had been watching the screen turned to the audience, all the fans in the audience held up the "thank you message board" that had been placed in the audience. Seeing this, all the performers on stage and fans in the audience cried together. It was a very emotional moment.

K-pop groups were not able to hold any live concerts or lectures in Japan due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many K-pop groups frequently came to Japan for live concerts because Japanese fans place a high priority on "meeting" them at live concerts. By appealing to the fans' loneliness when they could not see each other, the maintenance of the fan community was probably confirmed.

Surprise events here, however, have been essentially organized by fans at K-pop concerts. There would be a concern that fans would follow what the staff had prepared, an aspect that would undermine the spontaneity of the fans. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be assumed that safe concert management took precedence over fan spontaneity.

## 5 Conclusion

This study examines the sustainability of Japanese face-to-face live concerts, based on the results of a qualitative survey of participants in Japan's recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that after the COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese face-to-face live concerts continued to be an important and special place for Japanese fans. The awareness of them as a special place is partly due to the emphasis on the emotional bond between the performers and the fandom at live concerts. In Japanese live concerts after the COVID-19 pandemic, the distance between the stage and the audience was greater, but the physical distance was overcome by light spectacles, cheering paper fans and giant mechanisms. The emotional distance was overcome by images of 'family' and the sharing of heartache and great joy shown by the tears of the performers. This kind of performance contributed greatly to establishing a special and strong bond between the performers and the fans. This communal nature will ensure that the Japanese live concert industry will continue to thrive sustainably.

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