

Transnational comic franchise tourism and fan capital: Japanese *Attack on Titan* fans travelling to Germany

Timo Thelen, Kanazawa University, Japan

Abstract:

Fan tourism has become a mainstream tourism trend integrated into highly commodified infrastructures of designated sites, guided tours, and special events in which media producers and tourism operators collaborate to attract fans. However, there are also different cases in which the media producers deny any relationship and the tourism operators offer no infrastructure, yet a considerable number of fans travel to the supposed model locations, even halfway around the globe. In this essay, I contextualise and investigate one such case: Japanese fans of the comic franchise *Attack on Titan (Shingeki no kyojin)* visiting Nördlingen in Germany, which they believe to be an authentic model location for the comics' fictional setting Shiganshina. Based on a qualitative interview study, I examine how this fan tourism movement emerged and how its development was affected by different types of fan cultural and symbolic capital like knowledge, access, and prestige.

Keywords: media tourism, fandom, fanon, knowledge, authenticity

Introduction

Located amidst forests and fields in the Free State of Bavaria in Southern Germany, Nördlingen is a picturesque small city of ca. 20,000 inhabitants with many historical houses and is enclosed by a completely preserved medieval wall. This wall, however, brought the municipality unintended fame in Japan, as it resembled the life-saving city walls surrounding Shiganshina featured in the *Attack on Titan* franchise. After a Saturday evening TV variety show featured Nördlingen in 2013, just when the first season of the *Attack on Titan* anime series was being aired, the city became a fan tourism site overnight. An official statement by the media producers on Twitter (see the third section of this essay) that denied any



relationship between the comic franchise and the city went unnoticed. And in the following years, fan tourist experiences were continuously shared on social media, fostering Nördlingen's image as the model location for *Attack on Titan*.

During the last two decades, media tourism, particularly film tourism, has emerged as a recognised and productive domain within the field of tourism studies. Scholars have addressed and analysed the experiences of media tourists (Beeton 2016[2005]; Urry and Larsen 2011), their search for authenticity (Frost 2006; Buchmann, Moore, and Fisher 2010), or their performative activities (Reijnders 2011; Kim 2010). Scholars in the field of fan studies have also made essential research contributions investigating this phenomenon. For instance, Matt Hills (2005[2002]) coined the term 'cult geographies' to name locations related to a media narrative that attract fans' interest, thus becoming sites of fandom practices. Rebecca Williams (2020) proposes the idea of 'spatial poaching' to reconsider the relationship between fans and media-related locations as objects of a productive fandom, whereby fans' firsthand experience of a certain place helps them fill in narrative gaps with their own interpretations. In the Japanese research on fan tourism, commonly called 'anime tourism' (Okamoto 2009; 2015; Ono et al. 2020) or 'contents tourism' (Masubuchi 2010; Yamamura 2015; Seaton et al. 2017), however, other academic tendencies are apparent. Japanese scholars often emphasise the involvement of local (often non-fannish) citizens at the destinations, since fan tourism can become a means of rural revitalisation. Therefore, the model or filming locations are openly communicated to the audience and marketed as such to establish new tourism resources.

This essay, however, deals with a case of fan tourism that emerged on the basis of a rumour, without any official relationship between media content and place. Some scholars (Yamamura 2015) have already reported on the existence of such cases, but these sites are easily overlooked due to their lack of official recognition and short lifespan. I will examine the fan tourists' experiences and their practices of 'authentication' (Cohen and Cohen 2012) from an anthropological perspective to understand how such a case of non-commodified fan tourism could emerge. In this investigation, I also draw on the concepts of 'fan cultural capital' (Fiske 1992) like knowledge about the location and 'fan symbolic capital' (Hills 2005[2002]) like prestige and reputation resulting from online shared travel experiences. There are three similar studies that discussed cases of Japanese fan tourism abroad: Samuel Seongseop Kim et al. (2007) looked at Japanese fans of Korean drama series visiting sites in South Korea, Iwashita Chieko¹ (2008) investigated Japanese travelling to the United Kingdom for media franchises like *Harry Potter* or *Sherlock Holmes*, and Craig Norris (2013; 2018) researched Japanese fan tourism related to Studio Ghibli anime movies in Australia.

I begin this essay by reviewing and discussing the fan tourist's point of view and experience as well as how those can generate authenticity for media-related locations. In the second section, I focus on fan hierarchies and fan capital, which play a vital role in shaping the structure of fan communities and fannish tourist behaviour. In the following third section, I explain how *Attack on Titan* became linked to Germany and Nördlingen, discussing the comic franchise's references to this country. Then, in the fourth section, I



present the results of my qualitative interview study consisting of 11 semi-structured interviews with fans who traveled to Nördlingen. In the fifth section, I further discuss why the city was regarded as a model location even without any official recognition, and how this phenomenon can be explained by drawing on the concept of fan capital. In the conclusion, I summarise my results.

Before I start, a few words are necessary to clarify my vocabulary. I employ the term 'transnational' to describe the spatial aspect of this tourist movement. The fan tourists and fandom practices under consideration, however, are rather homogenous – a predominantly Japanese fan community of a Japanese media franchise. Thus I refrain from discussing my case study in relation to transcultural/transnational fandom (Chin and Morimoto 2013; Morimoto 2018). In recent times, popular media are rarely stand-alone products but are implemented in a strategy of 'media convergence' (Jenkins 2008) or 'media mix' (Steinberg 2012), i.e. in a 'narrative universe' or 'franchise' of various products. Attack on Titan originally started as a manga series in 2009 and had become widely popular by the first season of its anime adaption in 2013. The majority of fans I interviewed have consumed both the manga and anime series, so when they talk about the franchise, aspects of both media types easily get mixed up. Thus, I use the term 'comic franchise' to refer to Attack on Titan. I chose 'comic' because manga are commonly called 'comics' (as a foreign loanword written in katakana characters) in Japan, and even if there are some visual and cultural differences to their Western counterparts, the medium type of manga is close to what is universally labelled 'comics' or 'graphic novels'. In doing so, I suggest that my study's results are also applicable to the international, Western-focused research context.

Fan Tourism

Approaching the phenomenon of media tourism from an anthropological perspective, Urry (1990) coined the term 'tourist gaze', which was further developed into the 'mediatised tourist gaze' for the case of media related tourism (Urry and Larsen 2011, 20). According to Urry and Larsen, the consumption of media not only influences our travel decisions, but also our gazes at destinations, because tourists tend to compare an actual place to its mediatised image. In other words, a visited place becomes inscribed with images and emotions which visitors remember from previously consumed media content. Thus some places can become inextricably linked to media products; for example, the mountain panorama of New Zealand is now culturally bound to the Lord of the Rings franchise, and most tourists can barely gaze at this landscape without remembering scenes from the movies (Buchmann, Moore, and Fischer 2010). The mediatised tourist gaze is typically a 'collective gaze', which means that tourists experience their gazing together with a peer-group (Urry and Larson 2011, 20). The peer-group is, in the first sense, other tourists visiting the distinctive place at the same time, whose gazes and photographs testify to the location's authenticity. Nowadays, however, the important peer-groups are family members, friends, and perhaps most crucially other fans, with whom digitally captured travel experiences are shared.



Hills (2005[2002]) criticises that tourism scholars like Urry tend to 'dismiss' fans and their experience as well as these scholars' attempt to strictly differentiate between 'reality' (the physical object / the place itself) and 'fantasy' (media content depicting a certain place / fannish activities related to its geographical markers) (112). Hills instead argues that 'fantext affective relationships cannot be separated from spatial concerns and categories' (110–11). As an alternative approach, Hills coined the term 'cult geographies' as 'dietetic and profilmic spaces (and "real" spaces associated with cult icons) which cult fans take as the basis for material, touristic practices' (110). In opposition to Urry's concept, Hills regards fan tourism as a 'semiotic transformative process' and 'tracking down' of signs and codes to reconstruct the narrative structure of a place. Similarly, Williams (2020) proposes the idea of 'spatial poaching' – inspired by Henry Jenkins' 'textual poaching' (1992) – to consider 'the importance of being at a site [...] to read, and re-read, certain elements of the narrative and to add to these' (120). Williams argues that theme park visitors (re)interpret a mediatised place through their fandom activities and so creatively produce new narratives to fill gaps in the official stories.

In contrast to the highly commercialised fan tourism of theme parks, Hills (2005[2002]) describes cult geographies as 'a fan attachment to noncommodified space, or at the very least, to space/place which has been indirectly or unintentionally commodified so that the fan's experience of this space is not commercially constructed' (116). In Hills' examples, however, there is still a clear connection between the media narrative and place; even if there is no *X-Files* tourism infrastructure in Vancouver, the series was filmed there and so fan tourists are attracted to the city to visit the locations that appeared on-screen. Stijn Reijnders (2011), who coined the term 'places of the imagination' for the locations of media/fan tourism, notices the importance of such geographical links for media producers and consumers/fans alike:

Many films, novels and television series make explicit reference to existing places or regions, mostly with the intention of lending a certain credibility to the product of the artist's imagination. However, as a rule, these references confine themselves to establishing the story generally in a certain city or region. It remains in most cases for the readers or viewers to fill in the geographical blanks. That is also precisely what makes identifying localities such an addictive activity: the fan is stimulated into giving meaning to what can only be read between the lines (18).

But how can fan tourism develop when there is no obvious model location or link to existing places, when the whole setting is seemingly a 'geographical blank'? Media narratives from the genres of Fantasy or Science Fiction often possess no clear connection to existing places. In order for fan tourism opportunities to emerge, there must be additional information about where the filming took place, like in the prominent case of *Lords of the Rings* and New Zealand. Another example is Disney's *Frozen*, which is set in a fictional medieval Northern



Europe but employed to lure tourists to Norway. In cooperation with Disney, Norwegian tourist operators advertised the country as a model location (Metcalf et al. 2018). Such an interpretation of a place in relation to a media product can also originate in fan communities. In Australia for instance, fans of *Kiki's Delivery Service* or *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* began associating a bakery shop and a national park with the two respective movies. The spread of these rumours online led fans to believe the connections and they frequently travelled there, although director Miyazaki Hayao has never been to Australia and there seem to be no plausible links at all (Norris 2018).

The present case study is somewhat comparable to this latter example. There is no direct relationship between Attack on Titan and Nördlingen, yet fans of the franchise somehow made this link seem to be authentic. To understand how such an influential spatial misconception can appear, it is helpful to consider the idea of authenticity. Authenticity is habitually employed as a buzzword to promote tourism and evaluate tourist experience. From the viewpoint of tourism studies, authenticity in tourism is usually 'staged' (MacCannell 1973), i.e. established by a performative act that highlights what should be gazed at and hides contradictions or negative aspects. The performative act can range from a guided tour program, in which a local insider or supposed expert signifies the authentic quality of a place, object, or custom, to simple explanatory signs inscribing a desired interpretation into a place or object. Ning Wang (1999) distinguished three types of authenticity in tourism: 1) objective/object authenticity: something can be considered as actually being authentic, often in a historical sense; 2) constructed authenticity: something is made-up to be recognised as authentic by tourists; and 3) subjective/essential authenticity: the tourist experiences something as authentic, regardless of its objective authenticity (Cohen and Cohen 2012).

Authenticity in the latter sense – as a subjective experience – matters a lot in fan tourism, as Williams (2018) argues that 'the tension between authentic and inauthentic places and experiences is one that is often negotiated by fan tourists' (101). This negotiation goes beyond a simple comparison. Reijnders (2011) remarks that fan tourist experiences have a reciprocal aspect: 'These places are "authentic" because they provide the decor for the stories – historical and fictional. Simultaneously, the stories are experienced as "real" because they are put into place' (113–14).

Fan tourists often perform activities that ascertain authenticity and create a satisfying travel experience. For instance, Kyungjae Jang (2020) describes how Korean fan tourists of a Japanese media franchise perform several little 'rituals' during their fan pilgrimage in Japan, like reenacting scenes, and how sharing these moments on social media establishes a notion of authenticity for their tourist experience among the fan community. Okamoto Takashi (2015) similarly noted about fan tourist practices like writing Shinto votive plaques (*ema*) with fannish motives or cosplaying at the 'sacred place'. Williams (2019) called such practices and rituals with the involvement of 'fannish artefacts' like merchandise items or souvenirs a 'paratextual-spatio-play': 'Whilst fans themselves cannot "enter" the narrative world, the use of relevant fannish artifacts allows play with the borders between text, self,



and object' (73). These fannish practices and rituals can become a process of 'authentication' (Cohen and Cohen 2012), which is – in contrast to that performed by tour guides for example – rooted in fan communities and largely happens in the absence of media producers or tourism operators. Hills (2005[2002] similarly locates authenticity in the fan's experience of a visited place, in the intentional reassembling of signs known from a media content in combination with the physical presence: 'The "tourist gaze" is thereby transformed into a focused and knowledgeable search for authenticity and 'reality'; the truth is literally supposed to be found right here' (114).

Fan Capital

But how do these subjective experiences grow into a narrative accepted by the fan community in the absence of any official endorsement? A closer look into the ideas of fan hierarchies and fan capital provides some clues for understanding this process. The first wave of fan studies scholars (Jenkins 1992) were pioneers in empowering fans, contrary to othering or discriminatory portrayals in the media, society, and academia. Yet, they also tended to describe fan communities as rather utopic and harmonious spaces (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, 2–5). By contrast, the second wave of scholars (MacDonald 1998), influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) different types of capital, understood fan hierarchies as a very present and crucial social structure within fan communities. These social structures, for example, enable higher-ranking fans to produce fan magazines, organise conventions, or exclude female fans and sexual minorities. The third-wave of scholars (e.g, Hills 2005[2002]) further investigated such interactions among fans and fanobject relationships by introducing new theoretical approaches like psychoanalysis (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2017, 5–7).

It is largely agreed among fan scholars that fans tend to compete more or less consciously in their fandom. Bertha Chin (2017) notes that – in contrast to Bourdieu's idea of an intentional interest in capital to maintain or extend social power – 'fans' interest may be completely affective as well as subjective' (328). Chin adds the crucial point that the positions in fan social hierarchies are 'constantly contested and never fixed' (332). Moreover, she advocates the idea of various kinds of possible and coexisting fan hierarchies. For instance, an acclaimed piece of fan fiction only possesses a high position in this branch of fandom but not in fan circles focused on artworks, even if it is the same narrative franchise. Andrea MacDonald (1998) investigated fan hierarchies in the early online fandom of the US-American TV series *Quantum Leap* and found five dimensions of hierarchies, in which fans can occupy multiple positions at the same time: knowledge, quality (fan level), access, leadership, and (event) venue (137–38). Hills (2005[2002]) similarly considers 'fan culture not simply as a community but also as a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status' (20).

For this case study, two kinds of fan capital are decisive: fan cultural capital, i.e. the knowledge of *Attack on Titan*'s links to Germany and Nördlingen in particular, and symbolic



fan capital, i.e. access (travel) to that city, which results in prestige and the appreciation by other fans. John Fiske (1992) coined the term 'popular' or 'fan cultural capital' and opposed it to 'official cultural capital'. Sarah Thornton (1995) uses another approach and argues that 'subcultural capital' is not only a potential distinction between fans and the mainstream, but also among fans dividing them into 'good/authentic' and 'bad/inauthentic' members of their fan communities (Hills 2005[2002], 26). I employ the term 'fan cultural capital' in this latter sense, as a more or less consciously contested category within one fan community. Fiske (1992) writes: 'The experts – those who have accumulated the most knowledge – gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power' (43). Correspondingly, Mark Jancovich (2002) studied cult movie fandom and observed that profound knowledge about a certain movie as well as the access to this information or a rare version of a film, which gatekeepers limit, can provide a 'precious emblem of insider status' (319) within a fan community. Fan cultural capital can also include the knowledge of how to create derivative fannish works like fan fiction, fan artworks, fan comics (in Japan called dojinshi), or cosplay that are approved by other fans. Discussing the consumerism of Japanese fans (otaku) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Azuma Hiroki (2009) notices that the fans' attention had shifted from profound content ('grand narratives') to the 'database' of media products, i.e. the characters' design and the 'settings' (settei, the world-building). Azuma argues that when fans can faithfully reproduce the 'settings', i.e. the quintessential features of media product, their community will acknowledge the derivative works as authentic (33).

The second relevant aspect, access, is also a sort of fan cultural capital – knowing where to find a particular object or location – but ultimately results in fan symbolic capital when the information and the experience of access are shared with other fans. Hills (2005[2002]) offers two different ways of interpreting what Bourdieu described as 'symbolic capital' for this context: as prestige, reputation, fame or as the legitimation to represent and speak for a fan community (33). For my research, I employ the first interpretation of fan symbolic capital as prestige, i.e. the attention or appreciation of the fan peer-group. Using the example of theme parks, Williams (2020) analysed how fans not only 'develop affective and emotional connections' to mediatised places, but also 'create and maintain complex cultural hierarchies that privilege certain experiences, preferences and experiences for visiting over others' (11). Even earlier, MacDonald (1998) recognised the importance of fans' access to specific media-related people and locations when noting that '[s]ome fans have direct access to actors, producers of the show, production personnel, and in some rare cases actual shootings of episodes' (137).

Furthermore, MacDonald (1998) argues that online fan hierarchies function in the same structural way as their offline counterparts (139); although some offline determinants like gender or ethnicity are largely invisible online. Those with a high position in the hierarchy obtain the power to organise events, represent the fan community to the outside, and interpret meta-texts (141). Chin (2017) asserts that the structure of fan hierarchies became less rigid with the migration to online platforms. At the same time, reputation and



fame also became more clearly visible through click counts and social-media likes, thus becoming all the more important for fans. Furthermore, online space not only enables fans to communicate with each other, it also allows celebrities or media producers to react directly to fandom content. Nonetheless, it is still possible to share fan tourist experience offline and gain recognition for it. For example, Okamoto (2015) has studied how Japanese fans spread their travel experiences and information: Apart from using several online platforms like social media or blogs, some fans also produce hardcopy travel guides for fan tourism and distribute them – often without commercial interest – among their fan communities (27–28). Such altruistic behaviour is likely to elevate one's own status within a fan hierarchy and generate a kind of fan symbolic capital, which – just like online travel reports – elicits the envy of other fans.

Attack on Titan and Its Links to Germany

Attack on Titan (Shingeki no kyojin, 2009) started as a dark fantasy manga series created by Isayama Hajime (*1986). By early 2020, 31 volumes had been published and the series is estimated to have sold more than over 100 million copies worldwide (Yomiuri 2019), making it one of the bestselling manga series to date. However, the author has announced the end of the series in the near future. Although commercially labelled under the category 'male teenagers / boys' (shōnen), the series is very popular among female readers and can be considered mainstream popular culture, at least in Japan. Today, the Attack on Titan franchise comprises a four-season anime series, several video games, a live-action movie, novelizations, and countless merchandise ranging from figures to manufactured cosplay costumes. The franchise is set in a fictional 19th century world (sometimes categorised as steam punk), which basically resembles Western Europe. The story deals with an isolated human society hiding behind massive city walls from mysterious human-eating giants called titans. The main characters belong to the special military unit 'survey corps' (chōsa heidan) that fights these predatory invaders.

Iwabuchi Koichi (2002) argues that most internationally successful Japanese manga and anime are 'culturally odorless' (27); i.e., they barely reflect a Japanese environment or customs but are located in fictional Western settings. Even though there has been the growing trend of 'Cool Japan' (McGray 2002) in the last two decades – i.e. (media) products explicitly marketed as being from and about Japan – narratives in a pseudo-historical European setting are still popular. *Attack on Titan*'s fictional Europe-like world, however, seems strongly based on the German-language cultural realm. While many countries of Central Europe share similar architecture and customs, some features of *Attack of Titan* clearly refer to German culture, history, and language.

An obvious cue is the predominantly German-like character names, like Eren Jäger, Levi Ackermann, Rainer Braun, Annie Leonhart, Berthold Huber, Marco Bott, or Christa Lenz.² Besides a few rather French- or English-like names (e.g., Jean Kirstein, Sasha Blouse, Erwin Smith, or Connie Springer), the only Japanese name is Mikasa³ Ackermann, a female main character whose design seems slightly more Asian-like and who belongs to a nearly



vanished group of 'oriental people' ($t\bar{o}y\bar{o}$ no ichizoku; manga vol. 2, ch. 5)⁴. This fosters the impression of a fictional world inspired by Germany. Another, apparently trivial aspect is food. The characters are often shown eating potatoes, bread, meat dishes, or drinking beer. Such a diet is common in many regions of Europe; from a Japanese viewpoint, however, sausages and beer are considered stereotypically German food items (Sato-Prinz 2017, 483).

The focus on militarism can also been interpreted as a potential reference to Germany, not least because Japanese war buffs tend to romanticise German war history and fascism (e.g., Penney 2006; Jaworowicz-Zimny 2019). *Attack on Titan*'s story deals with a military unit and their fight to protect their nation against the onslaught of the titans, but it also depicts their daily routine, their motivations and ideology. The significant military pose of the right fist put on the left breast appears throughout the narrative as a sign of comradeship and obedience to authority, usually accompanied by the slogan 'sacrifice [your/our] hearts' (shinzō wo sasageyō) (e.g., manga vol. 1, ch. 2; chorus of the anime series' second-season opening song), expressing the willingness to die for the sake of the group or nation. Later in the story (manga vol. 28, ch. 114), there is an ethnic minority that faces heavy discrimination and is forced to live in ghettos. They are also obligated to wear a star-like sign on their clothes to identify them at first sight; this is a clear reference the cruel oppression and annihilation of Jewish people in Germany before and during World War II.

These references, which already appeared in the original manga as narrative and visual components, were supplemented in the anime adaptation by music with German lyrics. The first season's opening song, *Guren no yumiya* (crimson bow and arrow), starts with the phrase 'Sie sind das Essen und wir sind die Jäger' (commonly translated to: they are the prey and we are the hunters). Another song played in the 7th episode of this season, *Vogel im Käfig* (bird in the cage; 00:21:49-00:22:20), is even completely sung in German; the lyrics describe the melancholia of being imprisoned and longing to fight for freedom. The anime's other seasons similarly contain opening and theme songs including German lyrics. These features primarily provide a certain exotic appeal for Japanese consumers, and they also incite 'forensic fandom' (Mittell 2009), i. e. the fans' re-reading and researching in order to gain more knowledge of the narrative and the world-building. Consequently, German language skills can be considered as a form of cultural capital in the fan community.⁶

Given these references to German culture, history, and language, it is no surprise that many *Attack on Titan* fans recognise a certain connection to Germany. My interviewees recalled that they understood this link gradually, as little hints like character names or food accumulated, while the anime music's German lyrics eventually made the inspiration obvious. Curiously, the connection to the small city of Nördlingen derived neither from the comic franchise itself, where the name is never mentioned, nor from the fan community, but from mainstream television. The popular variety show *Sekai fushigi hakken* (discovery of world mysteries) has been aired monthly on Saturdays at prime time since the 1980s and depicts the scripted travel experiences of young Japanese celebrities in foreign countries. The episode broadcast on November 9th, 2013 dealt with Southern Germany. The travelling actress visited typical tourist attractions like Munich's Oktoberfest, wore a dirndl dress, and



eventually visited Nördlingen. The show established a connection with *Attack on Titan* not only through the actress' speech, but also by including footage from the anime. Features like the completely preserved wall enclosing the whole city and historic paintings showing a giant-like creature outside of the wall seemed to prove that this place inspired the original manga.

Even before this episode was aired, the production team reacted to the internet rumours that started popping up in response to the episode's announcement and trailer, which already referenced *Attack on Titan*:

Fans of Attack on Titan [...] thanks for your great interest! There is just one thing we want to clarify: Attack on Titan is entirely the creation of author Isayama's imagination. Thus, Nördlingen is not a model location for Attack on Titan! (Sekai fushigi hakken; @Twitter, Nov. 9, 2013, author's translation)⁷

However, this statement probably did not reach enough of the TV show's viewers. And even if the rural German city was not officially related to *Attack on Titan*, the similarities were sufficiently striking to motivate fans to travel there. The differentiation between canon and fanon in fandom knowledge can help understand why non-official information and interpretations of a media narrative can play such a powerful role within a fan community:

'Canon,' from a pop culture standpoint, is defined as the official storylines and back stories invented by the creators of television shows, movies, and books. 'Fanon' is the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation. (Chaney and Liebler 2007)

With regard to this case study, Nördlingen does not seem to belong to the *Attack on Titan* canon – official knowledge provided by the media creators of the comic franchise – yet it fits perfectly to the unofficial category of fanon, i.e. information that is largely accepted fandom knowledge.

Fan Tourists' Experience in Nördlingen

Between February 2019 and January 2020, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven Japanese tourists who had visited Nördlingen, eight of them within the last year. The interviewees were recruited by snowballing in Japan and Germany (the initial contacts were former students and friends), with the sole criterion that they had travelled to Nördlingen. Most interviewees (nine) had visited the city once, while one person had travelled there twice and another, even three times. One interviewee was not a self-acclaimed *Attack on Titan* fan, but accompanied relatives who were fans and thus wanted to go there. The interviews' time frame ranged between 45 and 90 minutes per interview, and the interviewees' age varied from 20 to 36 years. Most were in their early twenties and all were



women. Eight interviewees were only staying abroad temporarily (between two and twelve months), while one had settled down in Germany for a couple of years and two had lived there for most of their lives. Therefore, about half of the interviewees possessed what Hills (2006) calls 'geographical capital', as they were living relatively close to Nördlingen (within a distance between ca. 130 and 430 km). The interviewees' German language skills equally oscillated between early beginner and intermediate level, while the two long-term residents possessed native speaker competence.

Semi-structured interviews were considered the best way to examine the individual tourist experience and account for the interviewees' personal backgrounds, such as other fandom activities, their education, and profession. The questions centred, first, on their consumption and fandom of *Attack on Titan* and other pop-cultural media, and second, on their tourist experience in Nördlingen. In this second part of the interviews, the interviewes were asked to recount their visit in as much detail as possible. Five interviews had taken photographs there and were willing to show and explain them to me. All interviews were predominantly conducted in Japanese, audio-recorded, and important passages transcribed. The upcoming quotations were translated by the author and slightly adjusted for clarity – since Japanese language tends to use a lot of ellipses – but kept as close as possible to the original.

The ostensible connection between *Attack on Titan* and Nördlingen came to light in different ways. Three of the interviewees had watched the variety show episode that initially established the link between the media franchise and the city – either live or later on an online video platform. The others heard the information from friends or relatives, or found it somewhere online on commercial tourist websites, travel blogs, or fandom pages:

I saw the TV show where Nördlingen came up [2013]. A few years later [2015], I had the chance to go to Germany, so I wanted to go there. (A-san, 22)

I heard that Germany was kind of a model for *Attack on Titan*, but I didn't know where exactly. Some years later, friends told me that Nördlingen is the model location, so we planned to go there together. We searched for travel information about that city online [in Japanese], a lot of it was also about *Attack on Titan*, so we could easily plan our trip. (B-san, 21)

As the second quote indicates, nearly all of the interviewees travelled to Nördlingen in a small group of two to five; the companions were usually friends of the same age. Because the city is located in the countryside and there is not much to do or see, about half of the interviewees (five) combined the trip there with visiting other tourist spots in the region or included it as part of a business trip.





Fig. 1: City map of Nördlingen with the surrounding wall (interviewee's photograph used with permission).

The typical fan tourist's trip to Nördlingen starts at the city wall, which is the strongest link to *Attack on Titan*. The wall in its full shape is of course not recognisable from the ground, only from a bird's eye perspective. The city map showing the whole wall is therefore a common motif for photographs (**Fig. 1**). This perspective resembles numerous frames in the manga (e.g., manga vol. 1, ch. 1) and anime (e.g., season 1, ep. 1), in which the wall and its function are explained. A stroll on top of the wall around the whole city takes about one hour, while one can see the historical cityscape on the inside and a mostly green landscape on the outside. With a length of 2.6 km, it is one of the few completely preserved medieval city walls in Germany and was already a tourist attraction before its recent interpretation in the context of the Japanese comic franchise, which gave it a new quality for fan tourists:

The wall was the most impressive. Seeing it, I thought, wow, that's *the* wall! (C-san, 20)

I was very happy to be in Nördlingen. I could see the places like the wall I knew from the manga and anime. I wanted to see for myself whether they look the same, and they actually did. (A-san, 22)

The view from the top of the wall in particular evoked memories from *Attack on Titan* for the interviewees, blending the actual landscape with the media content, making it a cult geography:



From the top of the wall, it looks like in the manga. (D-san, 20)

When I walked on the wall, I thought like, oh, these houses look similar indeed; this one might have been the house of Eren Jäger's mother. (E-san, 22)

The fan tourist's 'focused and knowledgeable search for authenticity' (Hills 2005[2002], 114) includes what Williams (2020) names 'spatial poaching': the fans themselves fill in the narrative gaps between place and media content by being and acting there. One of the interviewees visited Nördlingen as part of a group of five cosplayers who posed as *Attack on Titan* characters in front of and on top of the wall. Another person, who intentionally wore clothes slightly similar to the uniforms of the survey corps on that day, made the signature gesture of the unit (right fist put on the breast) while standing on the church tower looking down on the cityscape (**Fig. 2**). In this photograph, the church tower looks much like the wall from the comic franchise. More so than the actual Nördlingen city wall, the higher church tower allows for a perspective very similar to the fictional wall. Performative acts like cosplaying or reenacting scenes at the location provide not only a deepened tourist experience, but also foster the notions of authenticity inherent to the mediatised place. Williams (2018) noted: 'Fans of fictional texts often recreate iconic poses or stand in specific places to take photographs which replicate key moments from their favorite fan objects'.



Fig. 2: Fan tourist on top of the church tower, posing like an *Attack on Titan* character (interviewee's photograph used with permission).



However, the fan tourist's gaze is not per se uncritical, as e.g. Hills (2005[2002]) and Reijnders (2011) have discussed. Many of the interviewees remembered attempting to compare the object to its supposed representation in the franchise, with different results:

More than the wall itself, for me the wall's gate looked a lot like in *Attack on Titan*. (B-san, 21)

The wall in *Attack on Titan* has no roof, but the wall in Nördlingen has one and is smaller. Yet, there are other interesting similarities. It's a tiny detail, but like in the manga, there is a river flowing through a hole in the wall. In Nördlingen, there is also a little river passing under the wall. (F-san, 20)

Besides the wall, a second reference to the comic franchise is the shape of the historical houses (**Fig. 3**). Standing close to each other, the buildings' simplicity and uniformity is considered to resemble that of the cityscape in *Attack on Titan* and sparked the fan tourist's imagination:

I was moved by being in Nördlingen, it indeed looks like in the series. But the wall is much smaller in size than the one in *Attack on Titan*. So for me, it's more the cityscape that looks quite the same, especially the similarly shaped houses lined up. (G-san, 22)

Seeing the cityscape, the uniform architecture of the houses reminded me of the flying chase scenes from the anime. (C-san, 20)



Fig. 3: Uniform buildings lined up on a street in Nördlingen (interviewee's photograph used with permission).



A third object frequently visited by the fans is the church tower, located in the centre of the city. However, in late 2018, when most of the interviewees went there, it was closed for renovation; thus, the tower rarely appeared in the interviews. The top (Fig. 2) is normally a popular spot for taking photographs, because it is higher than the wall and offers a better view of the cityscape. Inside the tower, there is a guestbook that contains a lot of notes from Japanese tourists. Nearly all of these include references to *Attack on Titan*, demonstrating that fans frequently go there. Signing this guestbook or drawing pictures (Fig. 4) is another way of expressing fandom and creating a personal link between place and media content. The guestbook thus becomes a fannish artefact that allows 'paratextual-spatio-play' (Williams 2018).

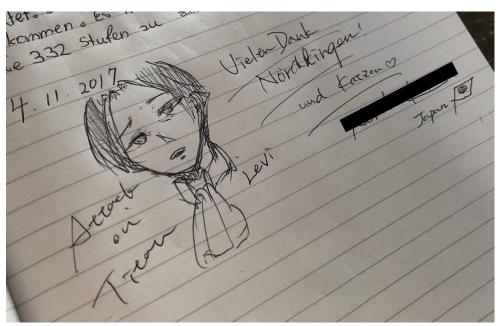


Fig. 4: Fan tourist's note in the guestbook of the church tower (interviewee's photograph of her note used with permission).

As there is no official tourist program offered in relation to the comic franchise, fandom activities are not only crucial for maintaining the supposed connection, but also give other fan tourists hints about where exactly to go in Nördlingen. The Internet and social media play an important role here. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, about half of the interviewees got their information about Nördlingen being a model location from various online media. Three interviewees, moreover, shared their own travel experiences and photographs on Twitter or Facebook, further fostering the supposed connection and defining the objects to be visited. One of them remembered that her tweet with the hashtags 'Nördlingen' and 'Attack on Titan' received more than 2,500 reads. She was surprised by this huge resonance, because she hardly uses Twitter in general and rarely had any reactions from unknown people before. Her example illustrates the fan symbolic capital that a trip to Nördlingen can provide when shared online.



Nördlingen as a Model Location for Attack on Titan

Most of the interviewees (nine) were not aware of the fact that there is no official connection between Nördlingen and *Attack on Titan*:

I am sure that some of producers must have been there. (D-san, 20)

I think that Nördlingen was somehow an inspiration for *Attack on Titan*. (B-san, 21)

Among these who didn't know about the official dismissal of any connection, one interviewee decided for herself after the visit that the relationship between the comic franchise and the city seems somehow constructed:

I think the connection is kind of made-up after the fact. The wall is different in its design and its functions. ... I compared many aspects, and there are in fact too many differences. (F-san, 20)

Norris (2013) recognised similar critical statements of fans disappointed by their visit of a dislocated 'sacred place'. While in Norris' study some fans were angry about the visible differences and the unauthorised commercialisation with expensive items, the fans in my case were rather gentle in their judgment. Fan communities tend to consider themselves as non-commercial 'gift cultures' (Hellekson 2009); therefore, I think that the lack of commercialised structure in Nördlingen directly related to *Attack on Titan* – no one has paid for a promised fan experience like in a guided tour or a theme park – is one aspect that probably tempers critical fan responses.

Two interviewees knew about the common misconception:

I know that's not official; yet, I believe that it was still an inspiration somehow, because it's still quite similar. (A-san, 22)

I know that it's not official. But I think it doesn't matter whether it's official or not, because it already feels like being official for many people anyway. This is a kind of interpretative freedom that fantasy stories have. (E-san, 22)

I suggest two approaches to elucidate these statements and to understand why the rumour of Nördlingen being a model location for *Attack on Titan* turned out to be persistent within the fan community. Indeed, the city possesses some distinctive similarities to *Attack on Titan*. First, the city is located in Germany, in a rather stereotypical countryside environment. German culture, history, and language somehow suffuses the fictional world of *Attack on Titan*, as explained earlier; thus, a location in the German periphery seems credible as a possible source of inspiration. In addition, Nördlingen's cityscape includes a



completely preserved city wall like the one in *Attack on Titan*, which is a particularity only a few places can offer. Therefore, it is understandable that a lot of fans think this fact must be more than pure coincidence. In addition to the wall, the architecture and the arrangement of the houses in Nördlingen also seem to fit the depictions known from the comic franchise. In short, the city in Southern Germany offers numerous strong references to *Attack on Titan*'s world-building or 'settings' (Azuma 2009), so it makes sense that many fans think of it as a model location and consider travelling there an authentic fan tourist experience. Much in the way fannish works imitate the design and tone of its original to make it appealing and approvable for fans, a post on social media retelling a visit to Nördlingen in the context of *Attack on Titan* with photographs of the wall, the cityscape, and maybe even cosplay can provide a similar quality of authentication. In this way, one can say that Nördlingen made its entry into the fanon of *Attack of Titan*.

The other approach reflects the idea of fan capital. As explained earlier, fan communities tend to have a certain degree of competition and hierarchy. In the Attack on Titan's fan community, a visit to Nördlingen can be considered a prestigious fandom activity that only a few fans can actually achieve. First, one has to have the fan cultural capital, i.e. knowledge of Nördlingen being a supposed model location, which requires some amount of internet research if one didn't happen to watch the variety show that created the rumour. Second, visiting Nördlingen from Japan means that one has to invest a lot of economic resources, energy, and time. Jochen Roose, Mike S. Schäfer, and Thomas Schmidt-Lux (2010) regard such investments of money and time as a fundamental characteristic of fandom. Even if one travels to Germany, Nördlingen is a bit far from the typical tourist routes, so an individually planned trip is necessary to get there. Having decent German language and cultural skills is another kind of helpful fan cultural capital here. Although travelling is much easier today than decades before and information translated into any language is readily available, I believe that visiting Nördlingen is still a great challenge for Japanese Attack on Titan fans compared to other kinds of fan tourism. It is no surprise that one interviewee's tweet of her travel experience gained much more attention than anything else she had ever posted online. This kind of competition is, of course, not always a conscious process, but I suggest that a visit to Nördlingen impressively attests to fan knowledge as well as the willingness to overcome various obstacles for the sake of being a 'true fan.' This surely results in fan symbolic capital, i.e. the adoration and possible envy of other fans.

Apart from fan cultural and symbolic capital, I suggest that Nördlingen's 'secret status', i.e. as a rather unexplored and non-commodified fan pilgrimage site, also generates a special attraction. Media or fan tourism is an important strain of mainstream tourism today with highly commodified infrastructures all around the world. For instance, the theme park Universal Studios Japan (USJ) in Ōsaka offered an *Attack on Titan* rollercoaster attraction for some months in early 2020 (USJ 2020). Meanwhile, Isayama's hometown in the periphery of Ōita Prefecture regularly hosts events targeting fan tourists like an exhibition of titan sculptures made of sand (Herrmann 2017). In general, there is probably a surplus of organised and commercialised fan tourism offers, and thus rather hidden



locations like Nördlingen are becoming more appealing for fan tourists. Hills (2005[2002]) argued in a similar sense that a 'lack of commodification (which could cause the relationship between fan and place to become merely compliant) means that underlying fantasies can operate in an unrestricted or loosely characteristic way, rather than being rigidly imposed' (114). Williams (2018) likewise acknowledges the potential freedom and advantages of noncommodified fan tourism:

In contrast, a fan who has sought out locations for themselves can visit in whatever order they choose, spend as much time as they want at each place and have more freedom in terms of how they behave at these sites. It has thus often been assumed that fans will prefer to visit non-commodified places, which are not owned and operated by media companies, rather than officially endorsed experiences because these are seen as more authentic and to allow the fan more control over how they interpret a place and the practices they engage in there. (99)

In the end, it is also crucial to note that for the Japanese fan tourists in my interview study a visit to Nördlingen coincidentally meant a trip to a rural city in Germany, which is likely an impressive and adventurous experience in its own right for young visitors:

First, I wanted to go to Nördlingen for *Attack on Titan*, but there are actually other interesting things. For instance, the cute cat of the museum is famous and even has a Japanese fan page. I heard from a local resident that most Germans living there have no idea about *Attack on Titan* or why more Japanese tourists than usual have been coming there in the last years. (E-san, 22)

For Attack on Titan fans, I would recommend travelling to Nördlingen. But besides that, it's also just a nice place, a kind of real German countryside. (Dsan, 20)

The travel experience thus is not limited to fan tourism; the coincidental notion of cultural (or ethnic) tourism enriched the visit to Nördlingen for many interviewees. Norris (2013) recognised a similar effect in the case of young Japanese fans, for whom travelling to 'sacred places' in Australia coincides with their own 'transformative journey' of coming of age (7).

Conclusion

I started this essay discussing fan tourism from an anthropological perspective, which sets the fan tourist experience in the focus of investigation. Given the contemporary proliferation of commodified fan tourism programs, the example of Nördlingen and *Attack on Titan* is special as it lacks touristic infrastructure due to the official denial of any connection. Therefore, I reconsidered how in this case notions of authenticity can emerge



and which role fan capital plays in this process. As my qualitative interview study illustrated, Nördlingen has some impressive links to *Attack on Titan* like the completely preserved city wall. Thus, the connection between Nördlingen and *Attack on Titan* seems quite plausible and obvious for many fans. Ultimately, it hardly mattered to many of the fans I interviewed whether it is officially approved or not. I think that the distinction between canon (official knowledge) and fanon (unofficial knowledge largely accepted by a fan community) can help understand this phenomenon: even if Nördlingen does not belong to the canon, it surely fits to the fanon and thus provides a taste of authenticity for the visiting fans.

Reijnders et al. (2017) mention that places of fan tourism can be divided into two categories: 'those created by local fan activity, and those created by media producers as a result of what has been filmed' (588). Although the case of Nördlingen might fit into the first category, it tests the limits of such a binary perspective. The initial misconception came from a third party – the producers of a TV variety show – that ironically had no commercial or fannish interest in the resulting fan tourism. This case might moreover reflect a new trend in fan tourism, similar to the development of general tourism in the last decades, towards an increased interest of rather unexplored and undiscovered places – the 'solitary' or 'romantic' tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen 2011, 19) – which is a reaction against the intensive commodification of (fan) tourism objects worldwide.

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Biographical note:

Timo Thelen is a Lecturer at the School of International Studies, Kanazawa University, Japan, where he teaches German Language and Cultural Anthropology. He received a Ph.D. in Japanese Studies in 2018 at Dusseldorf University, Germany. His research focuses on Japanese popular culture, media tourism, and rural culture. Contact: thelen@staff.kanazawa-u.ac.jp.

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Notes:

¹ For Japanese names, the family name is followed by the personal name.



- The Roman alphabet spelling of the names sometimes varies as they were originally written in the Japanese katakana syllabary alphabet, which only reflects pronunciation and not the Roman letters to be used. For instance, the character name 'Jäger' is sometimes alphabetised into 'Yaeger', or 'Huber' into 'Hoover'.
- The name 'Mikasa' could have two origins: the Japanese Imperial family's branch is Mikasa-no-miya, and there was a famous warship in World War I of the same name, although it was officially named after a mountain. Either way, this character name seems to resonate with the franchise's militarist and patriotic undertones.
- ⁴ In the manga vol. 2, ch. 5, Mikasa's mother calls them 'our people' (referring only to Mikasa and herself); in vol. 16, ch. 65, the term 'oriental people' is employed to name them.
- Another common but less dramatic translation of the phrase is 'dedicate your hearts'. But at the beginning of anime series' second-season opening song, the phrase appears in German as 'opfert eure Herzen', which means 'sacrifice'.
- ⁶ Elsewhere, Thelen (2020) noted that *Attack on Titan* may have led to a slightly increased interest among young Japanese to learn German and travel abroad during the mid-2010s.
- ⁷ https://twitter.com/fushigi_hakkenP/status/397994008229597184.