Beyond Innocence: Oomori Seiko and the Disruption of the Japanese Idol

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Master Thesis

Beyond Innocence: Oomori Seiko and the Disruption of the Japanese Idol

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MA Asian Studies (120 EC): Japanese Studies

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Figure 1 Oomori Seiko KILL MY DREAM TOUR 2023 performance at Showa Women's University SWU Hitomi Memorial Hall, Tokyo on 1 October 2023.

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Introduction

Figure 2 Oomori Seiko KILL MY DREAM TOUR 25 Jun 2023 performance of Yuugata Mirage with Yachia Riko at Kobe Gessekai

0.1 Setting the Stage: Oomori Seiko's Genba

For the fifth time in the past decade, I was set to see a solo performance by Oomori Seiko. Returning to Kobe after a few months, I anticipated a different experience from her last performance here with the idol group METAMUSE (formerly ZOC until July 2022, and renamed ZOC again in November 2023). This time, it was held at Kobe Club Gessekai which would serve as her *genba*[1] for the day. She would be accompanied by pianist Sugarbeans and fellow METAMUSE member Yachia Riko, who primarily performed as a dancer and occasionally assisted with vocals. Despite the hot weather, many female fans dressed lavishly in full (Gothic) Lolita outfits or were adorned with accessories. Male attendees, mostly middle-aged with a few closer to my age, dressed more casually, often sporting Oomori Seiko merchandise. Notably, the female audience outnumbered the male audience nearly two to one, which is unusual for a female performer with an "idol" persona, where typically most fans are male (Galbraith 2020, 71).

The venue exuded an air of sophistication, reminiscent of a refined performance establishment, situated at the crossroads between a traditional jazz club and the opulence of Moulin Rouge, possibly hand-picked by Oomori Seiko herself. Fans were presented with a wide selection of seats, including chairs close to the stage or plush sofas accompanied by tables towards the rear of the venue. Audience members entered with numbered tickets, starting with VIP fan club tickets, followed by general and student tickets in order of sale date. This meant that those who were the most proactive, and affluent would have the best opportunity to secure a good seat. With my general fan club ticket, I procured a seat in the fifth row, as around 50 people entered before me in the venue that would fit around 200.

So, a distinct spatial separation was evident between veteran fans in front, and first-time visitors in the back of the venue. According to one of the veterans, Kohei-san (personal communication, September 30, 2023), many fans at the front identified as wotaku ヲタク, a term derived from otaku. Originally, otaku referred to the often male-dominated fascination with cute girl characters in 1980s anime and games (Galbraith 2012, 6). Over time, the term evolved through media usage to describe individuals passionate about specific hobbies and

[1] Genba 現場 is a "place where something actually happens, appears, or is made" (Condry 2006, 89). Often performative spaces where performers and fan communities reconvene are dubbed as a *genba*. The usage is adopted in a variety of music scenes. For example, since around 2003 idol event spaces and the spread of handshake events have also started becoming referred to as genba (Tsukasa 2016, 74).

popular culture more broadly (Steinberg, 2012). Hence, wotaku is used to distinguish themselves as genuine fans who fully pursue their interests.

The performance was especially unusual for someone within the idol sphere of Japanese popular music. Yes, there were some catchy upbeat idol-like songs such as *Melomelomelon* ×〇×〇×〇ン and *Middonaito Seijun Isei Kōyū* ミッドナイト清純異性交友, but given the acoustic setting and Yachia's dancing, the focus was on emotionally intense, often un-idol-like songs. The most intense moments were the emotional performance of *Yuugata Mirage* 夕方ミラージュ, followed by the horror-infused *Vaidoku* with Riko crawling on the floor as if possessed. These two songs struck a nerve with the fans, myself included, showcasing Oomori Seiko's fearless commitment to artistry over maintaining a feminine, healthy image. It is unlikely a song like *Vaidoku* would ever be approved by a music label if she were not fully in charge of the creative direction.

Despite Oomori Seiko telling me after her performance in Kobe with ZOC a couple of months earlier that she viewed herself as an idol, there was little of the "pure image of an idol encompassing 'innocent,' 'childlike,' 'cute,' 'tomboy' appearances and personal qualities" (Aoyagi 2005) that she did not trample over during this performance. Compared to traditional idol performance norms, it was also distinctive due to its predominantly female audience and the sophisticated venue. Her repertoire, featuring many emotionally intense songs, highlighted her artistic autonomy and departure from typical idol expectations, emphasizing authenticity in both performance and creative direction.

Afterwards, I was approached by a fan who introduced me to Kohei-san, a male fan who takes a leading role within the fan community surrounding Oomori Seiko. As a graduate of the same Japanese university, he was eager to exchange information. He would continue to serve as my gatekeeper within the fan community surrounding Oomori Seiko. A group of fans that seemingly surpassed the confined sphere of idol performers, showcasing once again how large and still unexplored the field of Japanese popular music is.

0.2 Beyond Innocence; Oomori Seiko and the Resistance of the Alternative Idol

In contemporary Japanese popular music culture, one of the most prevalent phenomena is the concept of female idols (Galbraith 2012). These performers embody ideals of youthfulness and innocence, adhering closely to gender-specific norms (Darling-Wolf 2018, 136). They are marketed as morally perfect but lacking in worldly experience, with their innocence requiring protection from corruption (She 2022, 2). Their success, exemplified by acts like AKB48 dominating the Oricon charts for years, emphasizes their cultural influence (Galbraith 2020).

Nevertheless, in the presence of a dominant popular culture that guides performers, there are always artists who defy this influence, pushing creative boundaries and subverting established structures (Hebdige 1979). This holds true to idol culture throughout the early boom of the Japanese idol, henceforth referred to as simply "idol" industry starting in the 1980s (Galbraith 2020, 7). An early example is Jun Togawa, an avant-garde artist who critiqued idol culture through her satirical song *Suki Suki Daisuki* (1985). This song critiques the manufactured innocence through provocative lyrics such as “Kiss me like you’re punching me until blood runs from my lips” キスミー殴るように唇に血が滲む程. Hence, this song has been adopted as a cover by contemporary performers and groups that actively seek to shatter this constructed image of the idol (Aoki 2013).

Groups like Shonen Knife (1981-), Coco (1989-1994), Midori (2003-2010) and Shinsei Kammattechan (2007-) have since continued critiquing traditional idol norms mature through mature themes and DIY aesthetics, presenting alternative moralities and embodying imperfections. Even popular figures like Kyary Pamyu Pamyu disrupted norms through satire and eccentricity in music and visuals, as seen in "Pon Pon Pon" (2011). The final two groups that laid the groundwork for a proper counter-cultural movement against idol culture were firstly, Momoiro Clover Z (2008-), who achieved success through eclectic performances and a quirky image inspired by Japanese wrestling culture (Himeno 2017, 61), showcasing how blending the standard idol formula with other cultural influences can lead to success. Secondly, Dempagumi.inc (2008-) embraced a DIY approach and incorporated various otaku cultures such as anime and manga, with Akihabara as their central theme of operation.

These idol groups challenged traditional conventions and appealed to a growing fanbase seeking a more diverse and authentic representation of idol culture. As noted by Himeno Tama (2017, 60), idol culture has evolved significantly since the 2010s, blending with other subcultures. This evolution gave rise to the concept of the alternative idol, also known as anti-idol, alt-idol, underground idol, or idol subcultures[2]. According to Lewis F. Kennedy, the alternative idol is a "catch-all term for blending idol culture (both music and commercial practices) with elements drawn from outside the mainstream of popular music" (Kennedy 2020, 205).

Beginning in 2010, groups like BiS (Brand-new idol Society 2010-2014, 2016-) started a counter-cultural movement within the idol industry by deliberately breaking conventions to promote their music (Himeno 2017, 61). This movement, led by counter-cultural performers now referred to as *alternative idols*, has embedded itself within Japanese culture, challenging traditional ideals of idolatry both domestically and internationally, promoting a flawed representation of the cultural ideals of the idol.

Alternative idol is a multifaceted concept. Firstly, it functions as a movement, involving a collective effort for cultural change (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). Secondly, it operates as a subculture, distinguished by its unique cultural expression (Hebdige 1979, 2). Thirdly, it serves as a music scene, encompassing a community of musicians, fans, and venues centred around a specific genre within a defined geographic area (Bennett 2004, 8). This encompasses the social and cultural milieu where music is created, performed, and consumed.

It is important to note that in online discourse, the concept of alternative idol is largely a Western construct. In Japanese, there isn't a singular term categorizing these alternative performers who often still adhere to many traditional idol customs such as close fan interaction and choreographed performances. For instance, Zenbukiminoseida (2015) presents itself as a sickly cute[3] idol group, while the influential BiS (2010) simply identifies as an idol group.

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[2] https://japan-forward.com/singing-songs-of-rebellion-meet-7-of-japans-alternative-idols/ last accessed on 30 June 2024.

[3] Yami-kawaii 病み可愛い A Japanese aesthetic that combines “cute” with dark themes.

In Japanese academic discourse, similar terms include chika-aidoru 地下アイドル (underground idol), live-idol ライブアイドル, and indies-idoru インディーズアイドル. However, these terms typically refer to idols who perform at small-scale events and maintain close fan relationships (Himeno, 2017). They do not inherently challenge conventional idol norms and often exclude alternative idol artists like BiSH (Brand-new idol SHiT, 2014-2023), who have achieved mainstream success as is evident in topping the Japanese Oricon charts. Therefore, in this thesis, alternative idol is defined as performers or groups who adhere to traditional idol structures and performance strategies while intentionally breaking cultural norms, particularly the established habitus of the idol (Bourdieu 1977). The concept of habitus will be explored in the theoretical discussion of chapter one, while the concept of the idol will be further examined in chapter two.

One of the most iconic examples of counter-cultural representation in the idol sphere is Oomori Seiko, a soloist, idol, and producer (Oomori 2014, 2016, 2022). I first encountered her in 2014 during a performance featuring Ling Tosite Sigure drummer Pierre Nakano, where she performed two reinterpretations of songs by the electro-pop idol group Perfume. Initially, her performance matched my preconceived notions of idols: energetic, playful, and endearing as described by Galbraith (2012). However, Oomori Seiko later stunned the audience by returning during an experimental improvisational piece, blending noise-rock elements, and featuring her screaming vocals as she crawled across the stage, defying traditional idol expectations.

Figure 3 Oomori Seiko performing as a guest vocalist at Chaotic Vibes Live in Liquidroom 29 October 2014. First picture during the cover of "Chocolate Disco" by Perfume (2013), the second picture is the improvisational piece "Chaotic Speed King Session".

This breaking of my preconceived notions led to my deep interest in her persona and performances. Since then, I have frequently attended her concerts, where she continues to alternate between embodying and subverting the traditional idol persona. Unlike groups like AKB48, which primarily attract middle-aged males, Oomori Seiko's audience often consists of young girls and women dressed in elaborate Gothic Lolita-style attire, reflecting her style. This suggests a female audience for female idol performers, possibly due to Oomori Seiko's focus on offering an alternative representation of femininity rather than catering to the male gaze (She 2021, 3). Her deliberate adoption of contradictory personas on stage raises intriguing questions: is her performance a critique of idol norms or an expression of adoration for them?

Up until now, much academic research on idol culture in Japan has focused on popular groups like AKB48 and Morning Musume, neglecting the counter-cultural movements within the music industry. However, Oomori Seiko has emerged as an important figure in challenging the traditional concept of the idol, reflecting the dynamic shifts in the music industry and public interest. My master's thesis aims to explore why she disrupts these concepts and norms, particularly addressing the question:

In what ways does Oomori Seiko disrupt the conventions of idol culture in Japan?

Through this study, I intend to examine the rise of alternative idols in Japan, their unconventional performance styles, and their growing appeal among Japanese audiences. The analysis of idol culture will be framed within the theoretical constructs of Habitus (Bourdieu 1933) and Habitus of Listening (Becker 2010). As Nishi Kenji (2017, 122) asserts, "Contemporary society is in a state of flux, and people are regularly placed in situations where the future is uncertain. "idols" are a condensed - and therefore caricatured - embodiment of the way people behave in such an uncertain situation. Idols, who are exposed to new situations must prove their growth by working their way through them, demonstrate and transmit to their fans their "habitus" (power) to cope with such situations." Disrupting

idol conventions thus challenges their habitus, a concept explored in detail in Chapter One of this thesis.

This thesis will focus exclusively on female-identifying idol performers, as male-identifying idols raise distinct issues requiring separate discussions[4]. Oomori Seiko's disruption is closely linked to challenges faced by woman in Japanese society. This research is significant for understanding cultural dynamics, power structures, and fan culture within Japanese popular culture. It contributes new perspectives to cultural studies subfields and illuminates broader social and political issues in Japan, including evolving gender roles, media representation, and changes in fan communities. By exploring the alternative idol movements, this study sheds light on contemporary societal issues in Japan and shows how music influences identity, power dynamics, and representation in the modern world.

In the remainder of the introduction, an extensive description of Oomori Seiko will be provided. Part one consists of the theoretical framework, methodology, and a discussion of ethnomusicological literature related to Japan. Part two will explore the rise and prominence of contemporary idol culture, tackle the question of what an idol exactly is, and link the idol with the concept of habitus. Part three will focus on the emergence and defiance of alternative idols, their growing mainstream influence, and their relation to the habitus of the idol. It will also continue the discussion of how Oomori Seiko disrupts the idol. This section will continue to draw from ethnographic data to explore the scene's development, sound, identity, and reception. The case study will primarily centre on Oomori Seiko throughout the thesis, with frequent mentions of other performers, emphasizing the community surrounding the alternative idol. Lastly, the thesis will conclude with a summary of key arguments and address the main research question. As she is the centre of the fieldwork conducted, it is important to first get to know about Oomori Seiko.

[4] Male-identifying idols open a whole new discourse on gender roles and expectations, including aspects of masculinity and appearance, fan dynamics, production patterns, media representation, career longevity and transitions, and differing standards and customs. Since these discourses are inherently different from those surrounding female-identifying idol performers, they fall outside the scope of this research.

0.3 Unveiling Oomori Seiko: Forging the Alternative for Idols

After attending Oomori Seiko's performance in Kobe on April 1, 2023, with her alternative idol group METAMUSE, I participated in the *tokutenkai*[5] to have a short interaction with Oomori Seiko. I took this opportunity to ask whether she perceived herself as an idol or a singer-songwriter. She confidently replied that she saw herself as an idol. She continued clarifying that she was an idol without lies[6] and wanted herself and METAMUSE to be more honest and relatable compared to her predecessors. Recognizing that her response may have been influenced by her role with METAMUSE that day, I took another opportunity to pose the same question during a solo Oomori Seiko fan club talk event later that year. Held monthly both online and in person in Shinjuku, this specific event was the 84th edition, taking place on November 25, 2023. Fans submit their stories and questions to Oomori Seiko and her co-host, photographer Ninomiya, who discuss these messages along with updates from Oomori Seiko's life, often punctuated with banter in a light-hearted atmosphere.

After I posed the question, roughly translating to "How would you describe yourself as an artist? A singer-songwriter? An idol? Do you aim to lead music in a new direction or prioritize being relatable to your fans?" [7] Oomori Seiko responded extensively. She clarified that she did not see herself strictly as a singer-songwriter because she believed their role was simply to perform completed songs[8]. While she does write and perform her own songs, she wants to use music to give shape to unformed ideas and issues in the world, rather than solely expressing her own emotions and thoughts[9]. She emphasized that she still also identifies as an idol, as she wants people to support her and witness her success, but she in particular wants to

[5] a tokutenkai 特典会 can be roughly translated to “benefits party”. This is an event usually after a live performance that allows fans to have an Instax (cheki チェキ in Japanese) photo taken with an idol of their choice. Sometimes these are signed and enable the fan to shortly interact with them, usually around 60 seconds. Access to the *tokutenkai* is usually granted by buying specific merchandise or a *tokutenkai* (cheki) ticket. Depending on the popularity of the group/performer prices usually start from around 1000 yen (Tajima 2022, 125).

[6] Translation from 嘘なしのアイドル

[7] English interpretation of the written question asked in Japanese「アーティストとしての自分をどう表現しますか？シンガーソングライター？アイドル？音楽を新しい方向に持っていくことを目指していますか？それともファンにとって身近な存在でありたい？」

[8] Interpreted from 「シンガーソングライターは生きてて歌ができる。できた歌を自分で歌っていく職業がシンガーソングライター」.

[9] Interpreted from 「世の中に形にされていないものを音楽にしたいという気持ちが強いので、特に自分の感情をいつも歌にしようという気持ちは」.

mix in the voices of different generations and perspectives around her. By sharing the stage with these diverse voices, she seeks to engage in meaningful exchanges with her audience. So rather than "pushing her music in new directions", she strives to express feelings and thoughts that have not been expressed before through music.

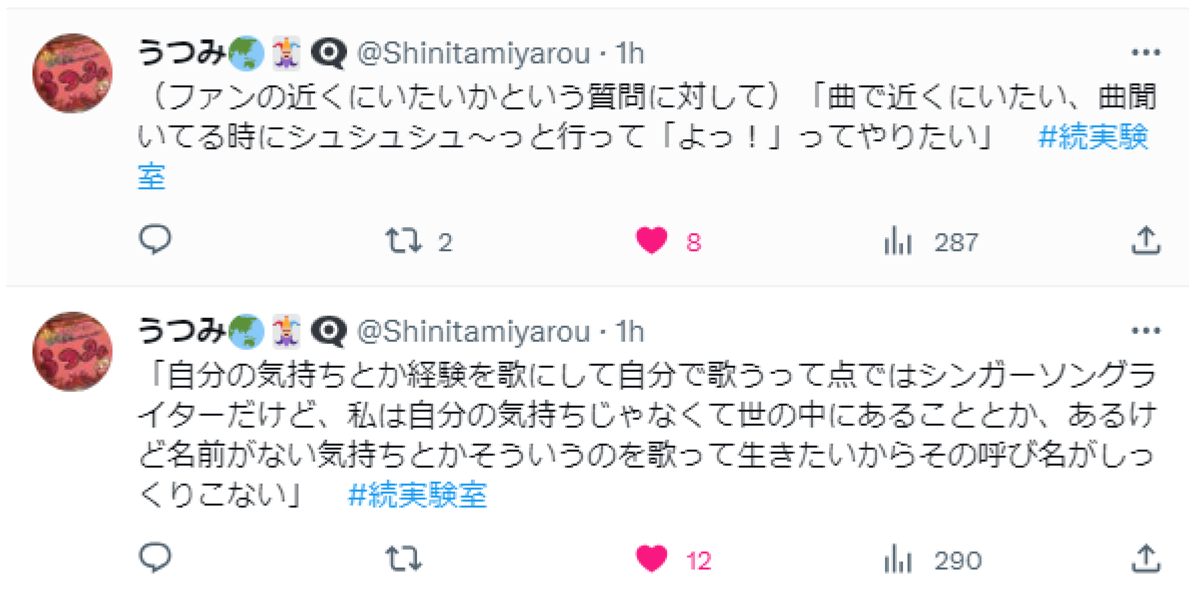

Figure 4 Oomori Seiko specific fan-account @Shinitamiyarou posting her answers to my questions described above in the fan club event the same evening on twitter.

As is evident in the disparity among her responses, she also struggles in characterizing herself. This time the question asked also steered her into answering regarding specific roles, however, there are also plenty of arguments to make her music fall in the category of a J-Rock, indie-pop, avant-garde, or folk artist. Similarly, her political stance could be seen through various lenses: activist, rebel, feminist, cultural commentator, or profit-driven performer. Aside from that, during the fan club event, her attempt to provide a structured response was humorously noted by her co-host, possibly due to the research context mentioned. Consequently, categorizing her within a musical genre poses a multifaceted challenge, reflecting ongoing debates about whether she fits the construct of an idol, a discourse this thesis aims to explore further.

Oomori Seiko, born and raised in Ehime prefecture, moved to Tokyo to attend Musashino Art University. At 19, she began performing in Kōenji's live house scene, forming the band *Oomori Seiko & The Pink Tokarev* 大森靖子＆THE ピンクトカレフ in 2011. In this period, she would perform primarily on the guitar. She made her major debut in 2014 after signing with Avex Trax, simultaneously announcing her marriage. In 2020, it was

revealed that her husband was Pierre Nakano, whom she performed guest vocals for in the performance mentioned earlier, and who was formerly the drummer for her backing band. In 2015, she disbanded *Oomori Seiko & The Pink Tokarev* to give birth to her child.

In 2018, she founded the idol group ZOC (short for "zone of control"), renamed METAMUSE from July 2022 to November 2023, which she produces and participates in. In 2020, she established her agency TOKYO PINK, where she debuted the idol group MAPA in 2021. In 2023, she expanded her agency to include two new acts: Chinhoza and TOKYO PINK MINDS. Currently, Oomori Seiko is a solo-performing artist, a member of the idol group ZOC, and the head of TOKYO PINK, where she oversees multiple groups and plays a significant role in music production (Oomori 2014, 2016, 2022). She has always been a big idol fan, expressing deep admiration for Sayumi Michishige, a former leader and member of Morning Musume's 5th generation, which is extensively discussed in her books and reflected in the lyrics of *Middonaito Seijun Isei Kōyū* ミッドナイト清純異性交友 (2013). Notable collaborations include Tk from Ling Tosite Sigure, Kazunobu Mineta from Ging Nang Boyz, and Noko from Shinsei Kamattechan.

So, Oomori Seiko plays multiple roles within the Japanese music industry: she is a solo performing artist, an idol in an idol group, an idol producer and composer, and a mother. Additionally, she has authored several books which detail her experiences balancing work, life, and child-rearing (Oomori 2016, 2018, 2022). What complicates her artistic and idol persona is her independence and high agency, evident in her control over productions and performances. This sets her apart from many alternative idols who often perform within controlled group dynamics. An exception to this could be argued to be Pour Lui of BiS, who similarly exerted significant creative agency within her group. This agency allowed these women to both maintain their groups' ties to the idol industry and disrupt the established habitus of listening within Japanese music. Before delving further into the concept of idols and its disruption, it is crucial to examine the academic ethnomusicological works that have explored the Japanese music industry in detail.

Part one: Ethnomusicology in Japan

Figure 5 Live house Shimokitazawa Shelter in Tokyo - queueing up for a performance by Kyoto based idol group Kinopo on 17th March 2024.

1.1 The Habitus of Listening: Bourdieu, Becker, and Embodied Listening

As mentioned in the introduction, this analysis of idol culture and alternative idol culture in Japan will primarily use Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Judith Becker's interpretation within the framework of the habitus of listening. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu defines habitus as a sociological concept that encompasses social behaviour within a specific "field." It represents a set of habits, dispositions, and expectations developed through socialization within a particular social context (Bourdieu 1977, 72). He describes it as "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu 1977, 86). These dispositions subconsciously guide an individual's patterns of embodied behaviour and customs (Bourdieu 1977, 114).

In addition, Bourdieu introduces the concept of cultural capital, comprising symbolic resources, knowledge, skills, and dispositions that individuals use to succeed within a field (Bourdieu 1997, 187). This includes not only formal education and intellect but also an intimate understanding and embodiment of cultural practices. In the context of idol culture, cultural capital is evident in the knowledge, behaviours, and dispositions fans acquire and demonstrate as part of their engagement with idol fandom. This includes familiarity with music and specific idol groups and the ability to participate in fan rituals, often grouped under *wotagei* ヲタ芸 (Galbraith 2019, 152). These rituals involve mimicking dance routines, performing cheering gestures, chanting slogans, and understanding the social codes and etiquette of idol events. By possessing this embodied cultural capital, fans can navigate and actively participate in the idol community, reinforcing their sense of belonging and identity within the broader cultural landscape.

Grenfell elaborates on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus in *Bourdieu, Language and Linguistics* (2010) and *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (2014). According to Grenfell, the "logic of association" describes how individuals who prefer a certain type of cultural practice are likely to embrace the customs and ideals associated with that practice (Grenfell 2014, 103). This internalization shapes their preferences and behaviours within the broader cultural context. Applying this to idol culture, if a person likes idol music, they are likely to embrace its surrounding customs and ideals, such as innocence, purity, and conformity. Performers

and fans internalize these ideals, shaping their preferences and behaviours within the idol industry.

The concept of habitus, according to Bourdieu and Grenfell, is broad and applicable in many fields. While habitus provides valuable insights into how individuals in the idol industry internalize and enact certain ideals and customs, it is essential to consider alternative frameworks offering an ethnomusicological perspective on the cultural practices of idol fans and their significance. This is where Judith Becker's notion of the habitus of listening comes into play, offering a deeper understanding of how individuals engage with and interpret cultural phenomena, particularly within music and performance.

In *Exploring the Habitus of Listening: Anthropological Perspectives* (2010), Judith Becker explains that the habitus of listening encompasses the act of hearing music, as well as the emotional and cultural aspects that shape perception and understanding. She states: “Modes of listening implicate structures of knowledge and beliefs and intimate notions of personhood and identity. Listening addresses interiors; listening provides access to what may be hidden from sight” (Becker 2010, 130). Essentially, people listen in specific ways unconsciously shaped by their habitus of listening (Becker 2010, 131). Listening is strongly connected to place, time, and context. In the idol industry, the practice of listening involves a set of cultural backgrounds and embodied practices. Becker also highlights the role of emotion in the habitus of listening, as music allows individuals to project themselves into different identities suggested by the music (Becker 2010, 135). We can go as far as to say it offers the opportunity to escape from the presentation of the everyday self (Goffman 1959).

Within this research, Habitus primarily applies to performers (idols), encompassing their behaviours, skills, attitudes, and practices that are fostered through life experiences. Conversely, the habitus of listening applies primarily to listeners (fans), focusing on their cultural practices, social expectations, and emotional investments in music. This thesis argues that alternative idols constitute a subculture that challenges these established habitus, both conscious and unconscious, contrasting them with their habitus. The foundation of this comparison lies in participant observation fieldwork conducted in Japan.

1.2 Methodology: Engaging the Idol

This study utilizes a qualitative ethnomusicological approach to explore alternative idol culture, focusing on Oomori Seiko and her community. Research materials included two lengthy interviews: one with a key member of the community surrounding Oomori Seiko, and another with a researcher specializing in fan practices related to her. Additionally, the study involved interactions with other fans, participant observation at live events, and limited direct interactions with performers. Grounded in ethnomusicology, which examines music within its cultural and social contexts, fieldwork spanned from April 2023 to March 2024 primarily in the Kansai area (Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto), with some activities in Tokyo. All images in this thesis were captured during fieldwork, either personally or sourced from official reviews and Twitter posts.

To gain insight into the fan experience and community dynamics, two semi-structured interviews were conducted in casual settings. These interviews focussed on their perspectives on Oomori Seiko and the community surrounding her. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and reviewed and analysed in detail. The first interview was with a leading figure in the community known as Kohei-san. Henceforth, Kohei-san will be referred to simply as Kohei. Kohei is a man in his early 40s who initially immersed himself in Western music until becoming a fan of Dempagumi.inc in 2014. This led him to the Akihabara Dear Stage, the birthplace of the group, where his interest in Oomori Seiko began through covers performed by a young aspiring idol. Since 2015, Kohei has been actively attending Oomori Seiko’s live performances and has integrated deeply into the fan community. He plays a pivotal role as a gateway for new fans, maintains an active presence on Twitter by posting Oomori Seiko-related content such as setlists after performances, content often reposted by Oomori Seiko herself, and manages a blog archiving past performance details. During performances, Kohei also leads cheering efforts, particularly during encores.

The second interviewee was Kyoto Seika University researcher Yoshikawa Masataka, referred to hereafter as Yoshikawa. Yoshikawa's research has focused extensively on fan practices surrounding Oomori Seiko. In his master’s thesis and a paper published through JASPM (2022), he analyses Oomori Seiko's use of Twitter as a platform for both sympathetic "phatic" communication, such as good morning messages, and "transmission"

communication, including activity reports and practical updates shared with her fans. Aside from Twitter, Yoshikawa explores how Oomori Seiko engages in collaborative artistic activities with her fans, likening this interaction through a quote to the community-building efforts seen with the Grateful Dead's Deadheads (Yoshikawa 2022, 29-30). He argues that these efforts have cultivated an unprecedented fan community surrounding Oomori Seiko (Yoshikawa 2022, 17).

Building on the insights gained from interviews, participant observation was another important part of this study. It involved attending various live events showcasing alternative idol performances, including concerts and fan events featuring Oomori Seiko. This method facilitated immersion in the cultural milieu of the alternative idol, allowing for firsthand observation of interactions between performers and fans. Detailed field notes were taken during these observations, documenting aspects such as event atmosphere, notable performer behaviours, audience reactions, and dynamics of performer-audience interactions. Additionally, audio recordings were occasionally made during direct interactions with performers, particularly during the *tokutenkai*, to ensure accurate capture of responses.

Ethnography, according to Jennifer Milioto Matsue, involves answering questions "in the field" and processing them into written form (Milioto 2003, Milioto 2009, 6-7). Fieldwork methodology is highly individualized and dependent on the project's nature and the ethnographer's personality. For instance, as a male researcher, extensive communication with female audience members was challenging despite their high frequency at Oomori Seiko-related events. Additionally, limitations in financial resources, timing, and travel opportunities restricted participation observation to a select few events. Visiting different events yields different findings, but I still believe my findings to be relevant examples and applicable to the wider alternative idol scene. By focusing on key interactions and in-depth interviews, this research captures essential elements of the fan experience and community dynamics, providing valuable insights into the broader alternative idol movement in Japan.

1.3 Exploring Music in Japan: The World of Japanese Ethnomusicology

Japanese popular music holds a compelling paradox: while globally influential hits like *Yoasobi*'s "Idol" topped the worldwide Global Billboard chart, the best-selling artist domestically according to Guinness World Records, rock duo *B'z,* remain relatively unknown

outside Japan (Patterson 2023). This dichotomy underscores the uniqueness of Japanese music scenes often overlooked in the Western academic world. Scholars like Mitsui Toru have extensively studied Japanese popular music, offering insights through works like *Made in Japan: Studies in Popular Music* (2014) and *Popular Music in Japan: Transformation Inspired by the West* (2020). These texts trace the evolution of genres like folk and rock, providing a foundational understanding relevant to discussions on Japanese music's broader cultural impact. Carolyn S. Stevens' *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity and Power* (2008) complements this by delving into 20th-century music evolution and industry dynamics, blending an outsider's perspective with insider knowledge.

In contrast, Lorraine Plourde's *Tokyo Listening: Sound and Sense in a Contemporary City* explores the city's soundscape, linking sound to emotion through embodied listening practices, offering a unique ethnomusicological lens. Jennifer Milioto Matsue's *Focus: Music in Contemporary Japan* (2016) and *Making Music in Japan's Underground: The Tokyo Hardcore Scene* (2009) further enrich this by detailing ethnographic insights into Japan's counter-cultural music scenes. These studies collectively inform this thesis by providing methodological frameworks and contextual understanding crucial for exploring alternative idol culture's significance within Japan's broader music landscape.

Similarly, several significant studies are focusing on specific genres and groups while considering the broader workings of the Japanese music industry (Yano 2002; Stevens 2018; Condry 2006; Ideguchi 2015). Christine Yano's seminal work *Tears of Longin: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (2002) explores how Enka music intertwines nostalgia, national identity, and cultural significance. Yano's analysis of Enka's intimate live performances reveals music's role in shaping collective memory and emotional expression in Japan, illuminating its influence on national consciousness and identity formation. This perspective on music's cultural impact aligns closely with the study's exploration of emotional expression and identity by Oomori Seiko. It underscores the broader implications of cultural resistance within the Japanese music industry, emphasizing how Oomori Seiko's artistic choices challenge established ideals and foster new narratives of emotional authenticity and identity formation.

In *The Beatles in Japan* (2018), Carolyn Stevens provides a comprehensive examination of The Beatles' cultural impact during their visits in 1966 and 1969. She illustrates how their music and persona challenged traditional norms and inspired Japanese youth similar to how alternative idols do that in the present day. This study deepens our understanding of cross-cultural dynamics and the globalization of popular music in Japan. Ian Condry's *Hip-hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (2006) extends this global ethnomusicological analysis to the localization and global dissemination of hip-hop culture in Japan. Condry's work highlights the complexities of cultural exchange and hybridity in a globalized context, revealing hip-hop's transformative influence on Japanese music and youth culture. It also describes many important concepts prevalent in the Japanese music industry such as the previously mentioned *genba* that play a central role in community building for alternative idols.

Continuing this exploration of Japanese musical fields and their cultural relevance, Ideguchi Akinori examines Dojin music's significance within Japanese Otaku culture in *The Possibility of Dojin Music: An Investigation of Music Activities Derived from Japanese Otaku Culture* (2015). Ideguchi's research shows how consumption and fandom challenge conventional creativity and participation norms, offering parallels to the dynamics observed in popular idol culture and the participation of fans in communities such as Oomori Seiko's.

Finally, some studies focus on specific aspects of popular music culture in Japan (Kelly 2004; Cloonan 2017; Manabe 2015). William W. Kelly's edited volume *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan* (2004) provides a comprehensive examination of fan culture and consumerism in modern Japan. By exploring fan experiences and motivations, the book illuminates the intricate interplay between consumer culture, identity formation, and social belonging. It emphasizes the significance of fan-star relationships, both during live performances and in broader contexts, tracing roots that influence contemporary idol-fan interactions seen today. Martin Cloonan's chapter on *The Self-Identity of Japanese Concert Promoters* in the *Handbook of Musical Identities* (2017) offers insights into the pivotal role of concert promoters in shaping Japan's live music landscape. Cloonan's work reveals the motivations, values, and strategies involved in music

production and distribution, underscoring promoters as crucial mediators among artists, audiences, and industry stakeholders.

Noriko Manabe's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima* (2015) explores the emergence of protest music in Japan following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. This study is pivotal in understanding music as a vehicle for social critique and activism in contemporary Japan. Manabe examines how musicians engage with socio-political issues, challenge dominant narratives, and mobilize public consciousness through their music and performances. This perspective is particularly relevant to discussions of counter-cultural movements, illustrating how artists use their platform to challenge societal norms, akin to the approaches of Oomori Seiko and alternative idol groups. These studies collectively enrich our understanding of cultural resistance within the Japanese music industry and provide a framework for examining how alternative idol performers disrupt conventional norms. Next, we need to better grasp what exactly alternative idols are revolting to.

Part two: Habitus of the Idol; Deconstructing Idolhood

Figure 6 HKT48 at Osaka Gigantic Music Festival 2023.

2.1 Setting the Stage: HKT48 Rockin'On at Jaiga

With the last-minute cancellation of one of the bands I hoped to see at the Osaka Gigantic Music Festival 2023, I seized the opportunity to watch HKT48 perform. HKT48, named after the Hakata-Ku ward in Fukuoka city, is produced by the famous AKB48 producer Yasushi Akimoto. Their performance was short but energetic, featuring up to 16 girls on stage performing a mix of AKB48 songs and their releases. This performance felt somewhat out of place on a day dominated by heavy rock and metal bands, which likely explained why they performed on a smaller stage with ample space in the audience. Despite the slightly lacklustre turnout, the group gave it their all, jumping, smiling, and engaging the audience. Unlike many other performers that day, the girls actively made eye contact with fans, often accompanied by a smile, a wave, or a heart symbol, which energized the audience. Thus, their interaction with the audience felt more personal than other bands, exemplifying the concept of the interaction ritual chain (Collins, 2004), which strengthened the emotional energy and sense of unity for both the audience and the performers.

Afterwards, while reconvening with my acquaintances, I was asked about my impression of the performance. I answered truthfully, saying that while the performance displayed an unhealthy obsession with innocence and obedience, it was also one of the few times in Japan I felt acknowledged by a performer. The girls actively pursued interaction with the audience throughout the performance, which perhaps explains why this has become such a major part of the Japanese music industry. In a place where human connection is often seemingly difficult to attain (Delakorda 2022), the huge success of AKB48 and its associated groups seems inevitable. The gendered performance of the idols is carefully constructed to cure many of Japan's middle-aged men with their innocence (She 2021, 7).

This performance, characterized by its emphasis on cuteness, innocence, and obedience, reflects the construction of femininity within idol culture. The girls' interactions with the audience reinforce this gendered performance and cater to their fans' desires, an example of performative gender (butler, 1990). The girls embody a specific gendered performance that aligns with the expectations and fantasies of their audience, predominantly middle-aged men.

The performance also highlighted the influence of the habitus of listening cultivated within idol culture. The girls' embodiment of qualities such as cuteness, innocence, and devotion reinforced the audience's expectations and fantasies, creating a reciprocal relationship between performers and fans that perpetuates the gendered dynamics of idol culture. Thus, the performance was both a reflection and reinforcement of the habitus of listening within idol culture, shaping how individuals perceive and engage with gendered performances in the context of popular culture.

While this performance took place within a rock festival setting, it still exhibited many common features of idol performances. These included coordinated costumes and choreography, call-and-response interactions, and *wotagei* as described by authors such as Galbraith (2012, 2019), Aoyagi (2005), and Tajima (2022). Despite the unconventional venue, the performance was a good example of a 21st-century idol performance, reflecting the evolution from the first 1970s idols as elaborately discussed in the academic field.

2.2 Unveiling the Idol Industry: Perspectives on Idol Studies

A substantial amount of academic research has explored idol studies from diverse perspectives. This section categorizes them into five major themes: Theoretical Foundations and Cultural Impact (Aoyagi 2005, Stevens 2008, Tajima 2022, Tsukasa 2016), Media and Communication Perspectives (Galbraith 2012 & 2020, Nishi 2017), Sociological and Anthropological Investigations (Galbraith 2019 & 2021, Richardson 2016, Himeno 2017), Gender and Power Dynamics (Kamioka 2021, She 2021), and Technological and Digital Transformations (Yakura 2021, Lukács 2020, Zaborowski 2023).

Firstly, discussing the world of idol performances in relation to the cultural dynamics of Japan is Aoyagi Hiroshi’s seminal work *Islands of Eight Million Smiles* (2005). The book delves into the performative and symbolic aspects of idols, presenting them as cultural products shaped by and reflective of Japanese society. Aoyagi's anthropological approach underscores the role of idols in constructing and perpetuating national identity and cultural values. He connects the idol industry to Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), as a “terrain in which cultural symbols and their images are constantly generated, contested, and refined” (Aoyagi 2005, 18). This suggests that devotion to idols gives fans a meaningful existence within that social arena. The book substantiates that the concept of idol

is inherently connected to Japanese society, and its cultural impact is undeniable. Chapter two, *The Making of Japanese Adolescent Role Models* (56-85), discusses the importance of capturing the adolescence of idols, leading to their short-lived careers as is often seen within the industry (Galbraith 2020).

Carolyn S. Stevens adds to this with her chapter on the 1980s focused on positioning idols, characterizing them as cute, childlike, and innocent (Stevens 2008, 50). She discusses how commercial strategies behind idol production affect perceptions of authenticity and how idols navigate the tension between commercial success and artistic integrity. Especially noteworthy in comparison to Oomori Seiko is how Stevens describes idols as "expendable" (Stevens 2008, 50), easily exchanged without backlash from their audience. The fact that Oomori Seiko embraces adulthood and is not treated as "expendable" deviates from the adolescent idol norm.

One of the most recent works in Japanese is Tajima Yuki's *Aidoru sutadī zu: Kenkyū no tame no shiten toi hōhō* (2022). This comprehensive guide for academic inquiry into idol culture complements Aoyagi's anthropological approach and Galbraith's cultural analysis discussed in the next section. The book reexamines society from a cultural phenomenon perspective to discuss various modern societal issues. It explores how the concept of idol has been academically discussed and defined, highlighting different examples and perspectives such as gender (chapter two) and fan culture (chapter three). While it does not specifically address alternative idols, it extensively describes the fan-idol relationship through Instax photos: cheki チェキ. This culture of cheki, a common method for connecting fans and performers, is similar to the handshake events that connect idols from groups like AKB48 to their fans (Galbraith 2012, 20-21). The cheki gives fans a sense of ownership and connection to an idol (Tajima 2022, 123). As someone who strives to build a strong connection with her fans, it is logical that Oomori Seiko also employs cheki as a major strategy in her groups and solo work.

The book parallels Tsukasa Shuichi's *Aidoruron no kyōkasho* (2016), an introductory textbook on idol studies offering insights into concepts like the general architecture of idols, the importance of cuteness (kawaii カワイイ), and the concept of graduation (sotsugyō 卒業). Even alternative idols often experience graduation, which entails departing from the

group, sometimes for personal career paths or management changes (Chapter Two). This positive wording attributes a sense of accomplishment and progress, ritualized and beautified by its association with Japanese school spaces, while departures due to scandals are referred to as "resignation of activities" (Tsukasa 2016, 38). This concept also intersects with the age of performers, often capturing them in adolescence and having them graduate after a set period (Tsukasa 2016, 45), hinting back at Aoyagi's and Stevens' works.

Secondly, within Media and Communication Perspectives, Patrick W. Galbraith emerges as a prominent figure in English-language scholarship on idol culture, notably through his pivotal works co-authored with Jason G. Karlin: *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (2012) and *AKB48* (2018). The 2012 book provides a comprehensive analysis of how media constructs and perpetuates the idol phenomenon. It explores the intricate relationship between idols and media narratives, shaping public perceptions and fan interactions across various genres and platforms. Galbraith's exploration extends beyond female idol groups like AKB48 to encompass male and virtual idols, illustrating broader implications for cultural consumption and identity formation in Japan.

Of particular interest is the first chapter written by David W. Marx which examines the role of management agencies (jimusho 事務所) in defining an idol's trajectory. He writes: "The jimusho work to create performers who can create revenue streams from a wide range of activities—of which corporate promotion is the most central. The result is that these firms: (1) promote "created" idols over self-motivated performers, (2) emphasize pleasant looks and demeanor over artistic talent, and (3) invest most time and resources into securing advertising deals rather than creating entertainment content itself" (Marx 2012, 51). This contrasts sharply with figures like Pour Lui of BiS and Oomori Seiko, who assert creative autonomy outside traditional management structures, thereby reshaping industry norms.

Without connections to management or their directives, performers retain substantial creative control, crucial for disrupting the established habitus of the idol. David W. Marx also argues that the success or rejection of the idol model hinges on Japanese consumer preferences (Marx 2012, 52). Hence when the craving for something genuine grows rather than the traditionally produced idols, it fits within reason to attribute this to the success of

performers like Oomori Seiko, who, as will be argued in chapter three, pursue genuineness in their performance.

Galbraith's subsequent work, *AKB48* (2018), delves deeper into the group's distinctive model characterized by large membership, frequent rotations, and direct fan engagement, which redefine conventional notions of celebrity and fan loyalty. As alternative idols have taken much inspiration from a lot of the characteristics of the fan-idol interaction as observed in AKB48, this work is important in understanding how alternative idols challenge and.

Finally, Nishi Kenji's *Idol Culture: Media Theory Perspectives* (2017) offers a theoretical framework for interpreting the media dynamics that sustain and propagate the idol phenomenon. Similarly, this research uses the concept of habitus to analyse idol culture, describing the habitus as acquiring already existing norms, internalizing, and implementing them in new situations, externalizing (Nishi 2017, 113). He argues that how an idol learns to behave in various media-related environments mediates the future-oriented aspects of the habitus (Nishi 2017, 119). He makes the argument that there is a strong connection between idol and habitus and that it is a vital skill. Hence, we can conclude that internalizing the norms and not following up on these norms in the externalizing process, or acting contrary to the norms enable alternative idols to disrupt the habitus of the idol.

Thirdly, regarding Sociological and Anthropological Investigations, Patrick W. Galbraith's *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan* (2019) shifts focus from idol culture to otaku culture, exploring its social dynamics, particularly around issues of sexuality. The book draws parallels with idol culture, particularly in its exploration of the origins of fascination with cuteness and young women, which resonate in the idol industry's success. Chapter 5 delves into the unique social interactions at maid cafés, where Galbraith applies Henry Jenkins' concept of "affective economics" to discuss how maids “build, develop and maintain relationships to shape desires and affect purchasing decisions” (Galbraith 2019, 189).

This usage of affective economics is prevalent in both the idol and alternative idol industries, exemplified by the cheki, discussed earlier, which proves to be an effective marketing tool for building relationships and retaining fans (Tajima 2022, 123). My first experience with the cheki by participating in a *tokutenkai* at the METAMUSE performance

left me initially nervous and sceptical. Although I had attended similar performances that included a *tokutenkai* such as Zenbukiminoseida in 2022, I was unfamiliar with the concept and hesitant due to my lack of knowledge about the idols. However, Oomori Seiko, the idol at this event, ensured a fun and memorable experience by energetically greeting me, taking the lead in posing and initiating conversation. This broke down many of my earlier mental and financial barriers, making me more willing to spend money to nurture these parasocial relationships. Many groups use these interactions to foster an affective economy, evidenced by practices such as alternative idol group RAY providing free cheki tickets to first-time visitors[10].

Affective economics creates a framework of mutual dependence described as amae 甘え by Matthew Richardson in his dissertation *Marketing Affect in Japanese Idol Music* (2016). Richardson explores how idols evoke emotional responses, strategically cultivating and leveraging these affective connections. He explains that both male and female idols present themselves as affectively vulnerable, encouraging fans to believe their support is crucial not only in a capitalist sense but also emotionally (Richardson 2016, 43-44). This connects this phenomenon to groups like SMAP and AKB48, which intentionally incorporate amateurish vocal performances to further connect with their audience.

At the live events I attended, including Migma Shelter performances at Ekusutorome in January 2023, Aidoru Kōshien in March 2024, and even METAMUSE performances in Kobe in April 2023 and Kyoto in January 2024, I noticed that many alternative idol groups delivered seemingly subpar vocal performances, with occasional false notes or poorly balanced volumes. This imperfection, perhaps due to the idols balancing energetic dancing with singing, added a sense of authenticity through amateurishness. Thus, concepts like amae are fostered in both conventional and alternative idol cultures, complementing physical objects like cheki as effective economic marketing strategies that perpetuate idol conventions.

The final work involving Patrick W. Galbraith and Hiroshi Aoyagi is the edited volume *Idology in Transcultural Perspective: Anthropological Investigations of Popular Idolatry* (2021). This volume compiles anthropological perspectives through case studies on idol culture, emphasizing its transcultural dimensions and even framing aspects of idolatry as akin

[10] https://r-a-y.world/for-audience last accessed on 30 June 2024.

to religious activities, where idols are worshipped as gods (Galbraith 2021, 10). This notion aligns with Kohei's comments, where he expressed that younger female fans perceive Oomori Seiko as a god-like figure (personal communication September 2023). This suggests a potential differentiation in fan dynamics, with male fans influenced largely by affective economics, prioritizing direct interaction, while female fans may lean towards idolatry, observing their favourite idols, or *oshi*, from a distance (Galbraith 2021, 192).

Finally, *Shokugyō to shite no chika aidoru*, authored by former underground idol Himeno Tama (2017), offers an insider's view of Japan's underground idol scene. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data, including questionnaires with underground idols, Himeno provides a detailed exploration of their challenges and experiences outside the mainstream industry. Beyond describing the facets of idol culture, the book addresses issues like self-esteem (see Chapter 3) and mental illness among idols (see Chapter 4). It also highlights the transformative influence of groups like Dempagumi.inc and BiS on reshaping the idol landscape (Himeno 2017, 61), filling a critical gap in the literature on these groups and advancing discussions within the field.

Fourthly, several academic works delve into gender and power dynamics within the context of idol culture. Among the most significant are Kamioka Mana's *Aidoru ongaku no jissen to kyōsei-teki isei*, published in JASPM (2021), and Yasheng She's *A Cure for Woundless Pain* (2021). Kamioka explores how idol music intersects with gender and enforced heterosexuality, critiquing how idol performances often reinforce traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideals and are highly controlled in their sexual exploration and dating lives. She highlights the 2013 scandal involving Minami Minegishi of AKB48, who shaved her head in apology for violating the group's no-dating rule, framing it as a corruption of her perceived innocence (Kamioka 2021, 2). She continues her analysis by examining how idols provide emotional and psychological support to fans, addressing their "woundless pain" through their embodiment of innocence. These works are crucial for shedding light on prevalent sexuality issues in the idol industry, such as the assumed heterosexuality of idols (Kamioka 2021, 50), the unhealthy obsession with innocence, and the impact of the male "guardian gaze" (She 2021, 14). They stand in stark contrast to disruptions by Oomori Seiko,

who openly addresses gender issues, sexuality, and adult themes in her music, including her own experience of being a victim of sexual assault as a minor (Oomori 2018).

Fifthly and finally, there is a wide array of academic literature that delves specifically into the Technological and Digital Transformations of the idol. Yakura's study (2021) investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on idol culture, focusing on the shift from physical to virtual interactions and how computer-mediated communication has transformed fan engagement. Lukács' research (2020) explores the rise of net idols and their role in the digital economy, emphasizing the labour and commodification aspects of their online presence. Especially the concept of virtual idols, exemplified by Hatsune Miku, has been extensively researched (Jørgensen 2017, Lam 2016, Yamada 2017).

This all is tied together by Zaborowski's work examining how digital technology has transformed listening practices and the consumption of idol music in Japan, highlighting generational differences in music consumption and the influence of digital media on the idol industry. Similarly, contemporary anti-idol culture often manifests online, in digital communities on platforms like Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube which aligns closely with the findings discussed by Yoshikawa (2022). In the alternative idol sphere, performers typically maintain active Twitter accounts, often as part of their contractual obligations, using these platforms for community-building alongside updates on their activities (Yoshikawa 2022, 17).

Many academic works face challenges in defining what constitutes an idol, employing various perspectives to approach the topic. Similarly, defining the alternative idol within this thesis posed difficulties due to the ambivalence between supposed counter-cultural ideals and mainstream success. Given the research scope, it is essential to consider the perspectives of idol performers themselves, particularly those within the alternative idol sphere. How do these performers conceptualize and perceive the notion of the idol?

2.3 Alternative Perspectives: Defining the Idol

Throughout my fieldwork in Japan's alternative and indie idol music scene, I interviewed numerous alternative idols to explore their interpretations of the concept of the

idol. Consistently asking them the same question, "What is the concept of the idol?" [11] yielded diverse perspectives. Yachia Riko from Tokyo Pink (ZOC) described idols as "something that expands the world," while Coshoji Megumi (MAPA, formerly BiS and Maison Book Girl) likened idols to "kirakira" キラキラ, conveying something that sparkles or dazzles metaphorically. Both responses reflect a positive outlook, highlighting their appreciation for being part of the idol industry and their supportive stance towards it.

Regarding groups not associated with Tokyo Pink, most idols expressed similarly positive views of the concept of the idol. The most common response was "life" (jinsei 人生), as articulated by Ami (RAY), Tominaga Sakura (BELLRING Shoujo Heart), Ashita Sakurane, and Kurumi Midori (Kinopo). Tominaga Sakura emphasized that idols are essential for life itself, while Kurumi Midori expressed that being an idol is what keeps her doing her best every day. Ashita Sakurane connected the concept to "youth" (seishun 青春), explaining that after a difficult time in high school, she is now fulfilling her youth by being an idol. This response of youth was also highlighted by Shirosaka Moa (Blacknazarene) and Kuon Inori (MagMell), once again underscoring its significance in the idol industry (Darling-Wolf 2018, 136).

Aside from that, Murakami Eme (Ranaqura) and Yuinon (Migma Shelter) expressed that being an idol brings smiles to everyone, spreading cheerfulness and happiness. Another positive response came from Uchiyama Yua (RAY), who described the idol as "light", indicating that the support from everyone makes it easier for her to enjoy her life as an idol. Additionally, Chikuwa (Husky) defined being an idol as motivation to keep going, stating that idols help energize people even during tough times, encouraging them to think positively about the future.

The final positive response I received was from Hinano (Axelight). After an Axelight performance at the January 2024 Ekusutorome alternative idol event, I spoke with a middle-aged male fan who was deeply devoted to Hinano, dressed in *wotagei* attire. He explained that having missed out on his own dreams in youth, he supported Hinano in hopes of helping her achieve hers. As a gesture of goodwill, he gave me a cheki ticket for a brief interaction with Hinano. When I asked her about the concept of being an idol, she replied that "idols

[11] Kimi ni totte, aidoru to wa nan desu ka? 君にとって、アイドルとは何ですか？

were her dream" and expressed her joy at being able to live that dream through performing at the event. This example highlights how both conventional and alternative idols rely on fans as supporters and nurturers (She 2022, 2).

However, not all responses were as positive. The only outspokenly negative response regarding the concept of idol came from Brazil of the psychedelic trance idol group Migma Shelter. As one of the group's long-time members who initially joined as a fan of their music, Brazil expressed her ambivalence towards idol culture outside of her group. She stated that she was not really a fan of idol culture, perceiving idols as overly suppressed or constrained[12]. Intrigued by this contrasting viewpoint, I revisited the question with her a couple of months later. This time, she again struggled to formulate an answer but eventually replied with "life". Unlike similar previous responses, however, she hinted at negative aspects, suggesting that being an idol also encompasses struggles, hardships, and dependency.

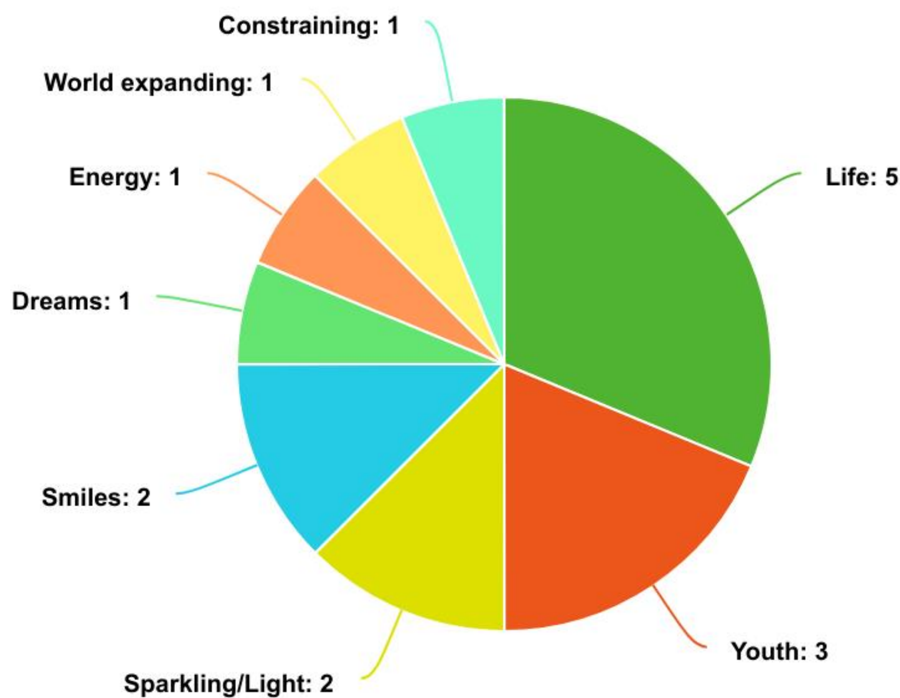

Figure 7 Division of the answer from various alternative idol performers to the question "what is an Idol"

[12] Translated from yokuatsusaresugita 抑圧されすぎた

Based on these perspectives, defining the habitus of the idol remains nuanced and multifaceted. For many idols, including Brazil and Coshoji Megumi, being an idol is not just a profession but a way of life including many challenges and rewards. They acknowledge the struggles and difficulties inherent in their role, yet also derive fulfilment from energizing and bringing happiness to their fans during performances. Unlike Brazil and perhaps a few others, most idols I spoke with did not strongly differentiate themselves from conventional idol performers. Many likely aspired to join traditional groups but found opportunities there for alternative groups. Given these perspectives, how would we thus define the habitus of the idol?

2.4 Constructing the Habitus of the Idol

Based on the literature and fieldwork, the habitus of the idol can be defined as the ingrained behaviours, attitudes, and practices that idols develop through their training and career, which shape their identity and interactions within the industry. These behaviours and attitudes are often unconsciously guided principles that permeate every aspect of their lives as performers. Firstly, the habitus of the idol entails a polished stage presence characterized by energy and passion (Galbraith 2012). They embody the *kawaii* (cuteness) aesthetic (Tsukasa 2016) while also incorporating elements of amateurishness to evoke purity and innocence, appealing to the "guardian gaze" of their fans (She 2021). Essentially, idols are seen as hardworking and passionate young women who rely on the support of their fans.

Secondly, the habitus emphasizes the importance of fan interaction and building affective economics. Idols are expected to be approachable and actively engage with fans through personal greetings, handshakes, and maintaining eye contact during performances (Galbraith 2012 & 2019). This interaction is integral to their role, fostering a cheerful and approachable demeanour that enhances their connection with their audience. Thirdly, discipline and personal conduct are integral aspects of the habitus of the idol. Idols undergo rigorous training in singing, dancing, and public speaking, and they face high expectations. They must maintain punctuality, show respect to their seniors, and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their craft (Aoyagi 2005). Teamwork and harmony within idol groups are also prioritized, often requiring idols to set aside personal ambitions for the collective success of the group. Maintaining a clean image is also crucial to uphold purity and innocence,

thereby avoiding behaviours that could lead to scandals or negative publicity (Galbraith 2020, 58-59).

Lastly, versatility and adaptability are essential traits for idols in Japan. They are expected to excel not only on stage but also across various media platforms such as acting, modelling, and appearing on variety shows (Marx 2012, Nishi 2017). This versatility allows idols to cater to diverse audiences and contexts, ensuring their relevance and appeal in different media formats and is where the future-oriented aspect of the habitus is prevalent (Nishi 2017, 119).

The habitus of listening to idols encompasses culturally and socially conditioned practices that shape fans' expectations and emotional engagement with idol music. It involves an appreciation for aesthetic elements like catchy melodies, upbeat rhythms, and choreographed visuals inherent to the culture (Ayoagi 2005, 32). Fans interact through media platforms, idol-fan events, and collectibles like cheki (Tajima 2022, 123), deepening their emotional connection. This can sometimes lead to idols being revered as God-like figures (Galbraith 2021, 10), reflecting a deeply embedded cultural practice that goes beyond auditory enjoyment to encompass holistic and immersive engagement with idols. Finally, Fans participate in communal listening experiences such as concerts and online forums, participating in ritualized behaviours like coordinated chants and *wotagei* responses (Galbraith 2019, 152).

Part three: Subcultural Resistance, Exploring Alternative Idol Communities

Figure 8 BiSH performing at Metrock Osaka festival 2023

3.1 Studying Resistance: Approaches to Subcultural Defiance

This research focuses on how Oomori Seiko and other alternative idols disrupt the conventions of idol culture in Japan. It explores how the subculture of alternative idols resists and redefines mainstream idol culture. Understanding this requires grasping the field of cultural studies, particularly the concept of subcultures as countercultures. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige examines how marginalized youth subcultures of the 1970s, like punks, mods, and skinheads, use style and symbolism to resist mainstream culture and societal norms. Hebdige argues these subcultures create distinctive styles and codes to challenge dominant ideologies and assert their identities. A key aspect of this is bricolage, synonymous with DIY, Do It Yourself (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.), where subcultures appropriate and repurpose elements from mainstream culture to give them new, subversive meanings (Hebdige 1979, 103-104).

The concept of DIY is central to the alternative idol industry and its foundations. The example of Jun Togawa's *Suki Suki Daisuki* (1985) brought up in the introduction exemplifies this approach by using instrumentation and singing patterns commonly found in idol music at that time in a subversive way. She imbued the music with unconventional themes and meanings that challenged the idol norms. Two decades later this still holds true with Dempagumi.inc embodying creative independence in the idol scene. The group gained attention with their self-produced music videos and high-energy performances rooted in Akihabara culture, blending idol culture with various other genres and otaku fandom elements (Himeno 2017, 61). They used DIY principles to defy traditional idol expectations, significantly contributing to the development of alternative idols.

Just as punk subcultures pushed back against the traditional norms and ideas of their time, alternative idols challenged the conventional ideals and expectations of the idol industry, as well as broader behavioural and gender norms in Japanese society. Hebdige continues by arguing that subcultural styles eventually become commodified by the dominant culture, diluting their rebellious messages (Hebdige 1979, 92-93). This trend is also evident in the alternative idol movement, where unconventional methods are used to achieve mainstream success.

Babymetal (2010-) exemplifies this commodification. Despite blending metal music with idol culture in a seemingly countercultural way, Babymetal is corporate-run and structured like a traditional idol group (Plourde 2018, 298). Many performers in the alternative idol scene similarly seem to lack a genuine sense of authenticity. This is why Oomori Seiko is so crucial; as the next chapter will discuss, her primary motivation is artistic expression, and her independence allows her to retain creative freedom.

A more recent study of subcultures is Gary Alan Fine's *Group Cultures and Subcultures* (2010). Fine continues Hebdige's exploration of how subcultures form distinct practices, norms, and values through repeated interactions, often as a form of resistance or adaptation to mainstream culture. Being part of a subculture provides members with a sense of identity and belonging, marked by unique styles, languages, and symbols (Fine 2010, 250). By deliberately subverting the conventions of mainstream idol culture, alternative idols establish a subculture that challenges and redefines the idol industry. This subculture, much like the youth subcultures Fine describes, fosters a distinct identity for its members and fans, who find in it a sense of belonging and a means of resisting the homogeneous expectations of the dominant culture. This is evident in the alternative idol communities and the community surrounding Oomori Seiko, also discussed later in this chapter.

Although often not directly expressed due to her status as a major artist, Oomori Seiko's works and persona contain significant critiques of society, politics, and education, as noted by Kohei. This aligns with John Street's perspectives described in his articles *Music and Politics* (2011) and *Music as Political Communication* (2017). In his article, Street categorizes music's political roles, with "music as resistance" and "music as protest" being most relevant to the alternative idol scene.

The alternative idol movement can be seen as a response to traditional idol customs, embodying Street's concept of music as resistance. Music often serves as a medium for marginalized voices to challenge cultural and political norms (Street 2017, 4-5). Alternative idols, by diverging from traditional idol customs, exemplify subcultural defiance, using music to question and redefine societal expectations. This demonstrates music's role as a powerful tool for cultural expression and resistance. This is crucial as it allows alternative idols to be compared with other countercultural music scenes, like Japanese Punk and Noise, which

share similar political messages, and also explains collaborative efforts with artists from these scenes.

Street also highlights the importance of lyrics in protest music, as they convey meaning that is difficult to censor (Street 2017, 3). Lyrics play a significant role in Oomori Seiko's works, which explore themes such as existentialism, societal struggles, and femininity, as exemplified in her song *Kyuru Kyuru* (2014). This song delves into self-identity and the challenges of being a woman in a restrictive society. Although Oomori describes it as a relatable love song (Oomori 2016, 147), lyrics like "*Kyurukyuru* doesn't suit me, but I want to try wearing a dress and sing a song[13]," she acknowledges the conflict between her self-image and societal expectations while expressing a desire to embrace traditional femininity. So, what is the history of marginalized youth subcultures in Japan and how have they led to the alternative idol?

3.2 Subcultural Resistance: Alternative Idols as Cultural Rebels

The history of music countercultures in Japan is a rich tapestry reflecting the country's social and cultural evolution. Music subcultures began to gain prominence and occasionally mainstream success in postwar Japan, starting with the rise of jazz cafes (Atkins 2001; Novak 2008). The 1970s saw the emergence of folk and rock bands like Happy End (1969-1972), followed by punk and new wave in the 1980s with bands such as The Stalin (1980-1985), The Blue Hearts (1985-1995), and Yellow Magic Orchestra (1978-2012). Simultaneously, Japan has also been a hub for experimental music scenes like Noise (Hegarty 2007; Novak 2013; Plourde 2013; Hiroshige 2020), Onkyō (Novak 2010; Hosokawa 2013; Ōtomo 2014), and Hardcore (Matsue 2009). These scenes often intersect with alternative idols. For instance, BiS collaborated with the noise group Hijōkaidan to form BiS Kaidan (2012-2014) and provided vocals for the post-metal band Vampillia's album The Divine Move (2014), highlighting the close connections between experimental music and alternative idols.

[13] Translated from きゅるきゅる私似合わないけど 着てみたいワンピ歌いたいうた，Kyurukyuru きゅるきゅる is an onomatopoeia that refers to unstable spinning most likely referring to a state of mind that is impatient and in unrest hinting at the conflict of love.

So, counterculture in Japan, as well as counterculture in response to idol culture, has always been prevalent to some extent. As previously mentioned, the groups that were most important for the development of the alternative idol were Momoiro Clover Z and Dempagumi.inc, attaining mainstream appeal and a strong following whilst pushing the boundary of idol culture. They achieved this by combining idol culture with other prevalent subcultures in Japan, Japanese wrestling for Momoiro Clover Z and Akihabara otaku culture for Dempagumi.inc. Additionally, these groups have sustained their popularity without requiring members to graduate; most Momoiro Clover Z members started with the group in 2008, and two members of Dempagumi.inc are well into their 30s.

However, the most crucial innovation for the alternative idol movement was introducing previously taboo topics in songs and images. Dempagumi.inc's songs addressed issues faced by young people, such as bullying and social withdrawal, resonating deeply with a new audience (Himeno 2017, 61). And their overall eccentric personalities also garnered much attention. This as he told me, was similarly the case for Kohei whose interest in Oomori Seiko originated from Dempagumi.inc. He emphasized that a significant part of their appeal was their shocking lyrical themes and eccentric personalities, which both critiqued society and offered alternative ways of dealing with it.

Alongside the gradual rise of countercultural expressions and the blending of various cultures with the concept of "idol," the early 2010s saw significant transformations in idol culture. Himeno Tama attributes much of this change to BiS (2017, 61), which spearheaded the alternative idol movement through unconventional "anti-idol" projects. These included a 24-hour live performance, shocking music videos like "My Ixxx" (2011) featuring members running naked through a forest, and collaborations such as BiS Kaidan with the noise group Hijokaidan.

BiS was formed in 2010 by former solo artist Pour Lui and managed by Junnosuke Watanabe under the indie label Tsubasa Records. Pour Lui personally oversaw the auditions and participated in the group while managing it. Despite many interesting controversial events during its four-year run, the most relevant is most likely the release of the single "IDOL" (2012). As Billboard Japan highlighted[14], BiS appeared to shift towards a more conventional idol approach with a music video for "idol" (written in Japanese as アイドル), where they performed a quintessential idol song in maid outfits. Following this, Junnosuke Watanabe announced he would step down as director, and the promotional image used the tagline "let's buy the same CD over and over again." However, on April 10th, the release of the "IDOL" music video revealed a return to their usual unconventional mix of metal, punk, and idol, with the initial shift being a hoax. The tagline critiqued the marketing technique used by idol groups to encourage fans to purchase multiple copies of the same single.

Figure 9 Promotional image for the single IDOL (2012) with the tagline "let's buy the same CD over and over again."

Hence, BiS disrupted idol conventions using methods such as subversion and shock value. In 2014, the first generation of BiS disbanded, and Pour Lui pursued various music projects, including the second generation of BiS and the self-produced group Piggs. Junnosuke Watanabe formed WACK (Watanabe Artistic Creative Corporation), a music

[14] https://www.billboard-japan.com/d_news/detail/4170/2 Last accessed on 30 June 2024

production company focused on alternative idols. WACK has since created and managed influential groups such as Pla2me (later known as Gang Parade, 2014-), the Oricon chart-topping BiSH (2014-2023), EMPiRE (later ExWhyZ, 2017-), and ASP (2021-).

Other notable groups that have gained fame in this period include You'll Melt More! (2012-) with former member Ano emerging as one of the most influential figures in the alternative idol scene. Bellring Shojo Heart (2012-) integrated gothic themes into their performances, while PassCode (2013-) fused electronic music with metal. Maison Book Girl (2014-2021) innovatively blended math-rock with intricate choreography. Atarashi Gakko! (2015-) combined traditional schoolgirl imagery with modern pop gaining a lot of international success. Billie Idle (2015-2019) brought a retro punk sound to the forefront, and Wagamama Rakia (2016-) experimented with rock and metal influences. Migma Shelter (2017-2024) made waves with psychedelic trance music and branded their live shows as "raves". RAY (2019-), the spiritual successor to ・・・・・・・・・ (Dots, 2016-2019), explored complex genres such as noise and IDM focusing primarily on shoegaze. The current era displays a diverse range of sonic and stylistic experimentation within the alternative idol genre, illustrating how unconventional musical blends with idol culture define the essence of alternative idol performers.

3.3 Sonic Dissent: Alternative Idol Music and Subcultural Innovation

Let us revisit the most scrutinized example of an "alternative" idol group: Babymetal (2010-). Lorraine Plourde (2018) describes in her 2018 article *Babymetal and the Ambivalence of Cuteness* the embodiment of Japanese cuteness by Babymetal and how it is perceived as inauthentic within the global metal community because of the vulnerability associated (Plourde 2018, 294). She shows how the authenticity of alternative idols is questioned by the audience who perceives the group as a corporate construct rather than an artistic work (Plourde 2018, 296). On the other hand, she nuances the performances of the girls, whilst on the one hand, they draw on the notions of cuteness and 'girlishness', they also subvert them through " dark and demonic horror-based imagery and lyrical themes of positivity and empowerment for young girls" (Plourde 2018, 294).

Comparing Babymetal to traditional idol groups like AKB48 and fully independent alternative artists like Oomori Seiko, Babymetal aligns more closely with AKB48 in

structure. However, they challenge idol conventions through their unique sound and the absence of member graduations, which typically mark replacements with younger idols. While Babymetal disrupts some of the idol norms, their impact falls short of the extensive redefinition achieved by groups like BiS.

So, to what extent do groups like BiS and their successors disrupt the habitus of the idol? Traditional idol culture in Japan is characterized by polished performances, strict management of image, and adherence to societal expectations, forming a deeply ingrained habitus. Alternative idols such as BiS diverge from these norms by incorporating punk, metal, and other subcultural influences, thus diverging from the conventional idol paradigm. Their actions and presentations, including shock value, such as the collaborative performances with Hijokaidan where they tossed items like chicken's feet and a pig's severed head into the crowd[15], critique societal norms and disrupt expected behaviours associated with idols, thereby reshaping the established idol habitus.

The habitus of listening to idols traditionally revolves around light, catchy pop tunes with themes of innocence, fostering an environment that shows fans only positivity (Nishi 2017, 119). However, alternative idols disrupt this norm by addressing themes like social withdrawal, mental health struggles, and personal critique, resonating with a different emotional and psychological landscape. For instance, Aizome Karen from METAMUSE/ZOC, who battled social withdrawal (hikikomori), found success as an idol. By singing about their hardships, alternative idols become relatable to fans and forge a habitus that embraces narratives of overcoming adversity. This shift in thematic content demands a more introspective and critical mode of listening from the audience, positioning alternative idols as beacons of inspiration who embody a blend of passion and perseverance.

In summary, alternative idols disrupt the established habitus and habitus of listening in idol culture through innovative themes, sounds, and modes of expression that challenge traditional norms. They forge their habitus by nurturing communities and performance styles that celebrate individuality, critique societal norms, and emphasize emotional authenticity. This transformation not only redefines the concept of idolhood but also reshapes how audiences engage with and interpret idol music, appealing to diverse demographics. By doing

[15] https://natalie.mu/music/gallery/news/96841/193933 Last accessed on 27 June 2024.

so, alternative idols cultivate a dynamic subculture within the broader idol landscape, continually expanding the boundaries of idol culture.

However, the majority of alternative idol groups also adhere to many aspects of the established idol habitus, such as limited creative control and reliance on familiar techniques like cheki interactions for monetization and fan engagement. It can be argued that many of the groups categorized in this research as "alternative idols," like Kinopo, maintain structures, performances, and sounds closer to conventional idol groups such as AKB48 than to a performer like Oomori Seiko. So, what sets Oomori Seiko apart?

3.4 Oomori's Habitus "Let's make Oomori Seiko together!"

Oomori Seiko stands out from other alternative idols primarily due to two factors. Firstly, her unique position of agency allows her to hold multiple roles, including CEO, solo musician, and group idol, providing her with extensive cultural expression opportunities and nearly full creative control. This autonomy is crucial for expressing her ideas and incorporating voices she considers significant. Kohei told me he would not describe her as an idol, but rather a huge fan of idol culture. She thus incorporates many facets of the idol culture in her own work, especially evident in *IDOL SONG* (2017), an ode to idol culture with many catchphrases of her favourite idols. However, as she is artistically driven rather than financially unlike most of the production companies behind idol groups, she presented a unique opportunity for genuineness in her appropriation of idol culture.

There's an argument to be made that Oomori Seiko intentionally positions herself as an underground idol rather than aiming for mainstream "aboveground" status. According to Himeno Tama, the distinction between underground and mainstream idols hinges on the proximity between the idol and their fans (Himeno 2017, 65). The closer this connection, the more "underground" the idol is perceived to be; in contrast, mainstream idols maintain more distance. Underground idols often have a smaller fanbase, allowing them to personally engage with fans, remember names, and have extended conversations, even during merchandise sales or performances. This close interaction increases the likelihood of fans receiving responses, gestures, or eye contact during performances, enhancing the intimacy of the fan-idol relationship.

In my personal experience, and as highlighted by Kohei and described by Yoshikawa (Yoshikawa 2022, 28), Oomori Seiko actively prioritizes two-way communication in her live performances. Unlike traditional one-way interactions typical in conventional performances, she strives to connect directly with the audience through means such as eye contact. For instance, during her January 2024 performance with METAMUSE at Kyoto Mojo, despite being unable to sing due to surgery, she left the stage and went around the venue engaging in non-verbal exchanges with audience members throughout the venue, a practice she has consistently maintained at various other shows. This unique approach pushes Oomori Seiko's live performances one step further compared to other alternative idol performances.

Seiko Oomori's agency is best exemplified through her song *Magic Mirror* マジックミラー (2015). As Yoshikawa explained to me, this song marked a significant turning point for Oomori Seiko. After struggling with criticism, she wrote the song as a personal affirmation of why she sings: "My dreams shine only for your loneliness[16]." It serves as a declaration to support those who feel lonely or inadequate. Oomori Seiko actively utilizes Twitter and her live performances as platforms for people to share their worries and struggles, offering them a supportive hand. She has expressed that these lyrics have protected "Oomori Seiko" and enabled her to persevere through struggles (Oomori 2014, 133). In this way, she creates a safe space within her community for marginalized voices, particularly those of women, promoting empowerment, self-expression, and diversity.

The second aspect that makes Oomori Seiko unique is her community. Unusually accessible for an artist of her stature, she actively interacts with fans through her Twitter account, making messaging open to everyone (Yoshikawa 2022, 22). This accessibility fosters close artist-fan relationships, furthered by her genuine interest in fan-created works, often incorporating them into her official activities without alterations. For instance, the music video for her song 7:77 (2018) was created by a fan and used as-is (Yoshikawa 2022, 22), and she supported a fan-organized 47-prefecture stamp rally through Avex Trax, providing fair compensation despite the work not being carried out by professionals (Yoshikawa 2022, 25). This approach further revitalizes the fan community without

[16] Translation from あたしの有名は君の孤独のためにだけ光るよ

exploiting common idol strategies that limit fan activities to controlled environments (Yoshikawa 2022, 30).

Similarly, she embraces Kohei's setlists he writes and posts on his Twitter after every performance, reposting them unchanged, allowing him the freedom to interpret that she legitimizes as official. This contrasts with more superficial constructs in alternative idol culture, such as the previously mentioned Babymetal. Oomori Seiko transcends this habitus by engaging in collaborative artistic activities with fans on unfiltered and genuine terms (Yoshikawa 2022, 28). In doing so, the artist "Oomori Seiko" is created together with her fans (Yoshikawa 2022, 29).

Conclusion

Figure 10 Shoegaze Idol group RAY performing live at live house アメリカ村 BEYOND Osaka 12 Feb 2024.

4.1 Conclusion: The Alternative to the Idol

This thesis explored how alternative idols disrupt the conventions of idol culture with Oomori Seiko as the primary case study. This was done through the theoretical framework of the habitus in accordance with Pierre Bourdieu's and Judith Becker's theories. The purpose was to formulate an answer to how Oomori Seiko disrupts the conventions of idol culture in Japan. This was done by drawing upon earlier academic works in idol studies to define the habitus and the habitus of listening of the idol. Various ethnomusicological methods were then used to draw comparisons between habitus and explore the specific ways and reasons Oomori Seiko disrupted the habitus of the idol.

The habitus of the idol has evolved over decades, refining the aesthetic of innocence through kawaii (cuteness) and capitalizing on the commodification of youth, amateurism, and passion to establish a model of exploitative affective economics. Idols serve as symbols of positive energy and strive to embody perfected role models who alleviate fans' personal concerns. This cultural framework is embodied, practised, and transmitted through a broad spectrum of established customs, values, and interaction patterns, which are adapted and refined across various unexplored contexts.

Conversely, the habitus of idol listening is shaped by an emotional appreciation for the aesthetic elements of idol performances and fan interactions. It centres around catchy melodies, upbeat rhythms, and amateur yet spirited singing, while also encompassing socially conditioned practices such as coordinated chants and fan responses at live events. Ultimately, these elements converge in idol-fan interactions like handshaking events and fostering a constructed sense of ownership through merchandising and collectables like cheki that deepen emotional connections.

Alternative idols and their fans disrupt the established habitus in several ways. Firstly, they embrace darker and more mature aesthetics that challenge the traditional image of innocence commodification through subverting behaviour and personas. Secondly, they blend a variety of music genres and subcultures such as punk, metal, and noise with idol music, appealing to a diverse audience. Thirdly, they present themselves as authentic and relatable by openly discussing personal struggles, mental health issues, and societal challenges, diverging from the traditional symbol of positivity.

However, alternative idols also often still adhere to aspects of the idol habitus. Fan engagement at live events still involves coordinated chants and responses, albeit with minor "alternative" deviations and the relationship between idols and fans utilizes customs like collectables and merchandising. Although idol-fan relationships are supposedly constructed as two-way. Kohei has pointed out that the alternative idols still remain central to these connections, and fans often compete among themselves to express their devotion, creating dynamic and often erratic communities.

Oomori Seiko's multifaceted identity as a solo artist, idol, and CEO enables her to significantly disrupt the conventions of idol culture. While her participation in the group METAMUSE/ZOC aligns her with the alternative idol model described earlier, it is in her solo work where she amplifies this disruption. Her live performances are marked by a unique two-way communication style, where she makes a deliberate effort to connect with every fan one-on-one. Her declaration of intent musicalized in Magic Mirror (2015) exemplifies this, aiming to be there for those who feel marginalized, lonely, and inferior. Furthermore, the community surrounding Oomori Seiko is collaborative, with fans actively participating in her official activities, contributing in unfiltered ways, and receiving fair compensation for their work.

Despite sometimes describing herself as an idol, those I spoke with expressed that her persona is much more nuanced. It is safe to conclude that she is a genuine artist who embraces imperfections in her official work and habitus in stark contrast with the carefully constructed and perfected idol.

4.2 Recommendations for Future Research and Exploration

The methodology employed in this study has several notable strengths but also some noteworthy limitations. As the field of alternative idols remains largely unexplored academically, this study represents a pioneering effort to understand the intricate dynamics of fan communities and performer interactions. However, due to the continuous development, growth, and experimentation with new formats and sounds within this culture, this research only provides a snapshot of the current state. The fieldwork relied heavily on two primary interviews and observations done at a limited number of events, which may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of the alternative idol culture surrounding Oomori Seiko. The limited sample size, combined with the researcher's challenges in extensively communicating with female audience members, introduces a potential gender bias.

Expanding the sample size to include a broader range of participants and employing strategies to mitigate gender bias would enhance the depth and balance of the data. Additionally, the fieldwork's geographical scope was primarily confined to the Kansai area with a few exceptions in Tokyo, potentially overlooking regional variations in fan culture. Including a broader geographical scope could reveal regional differences and contribute to a more nuanced analysis.

Furthermore, the reliance on two key informants (Kohei and Yoshikawa) might lead to a biased or narrow view of the fan community. Incorporating more voices from a wider range of fans and stakeholders could mitigate this risk. The research was also limited by financial resources, timing, and travel opportunities, which have restricted the amount of participant observation. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample of participants and expand the geographical scope beyond Kansai to capture the full complexity of alternative idol culture. In addition, examining other idol performances and their fan communities will provide more valuable comparative insights. Additionally, although idols were questioned multiple times, these interactions occurred in constrained environments. Engaging with idols more directly in less restrictive settings could yield better insights into their perspectives and experiences.

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