

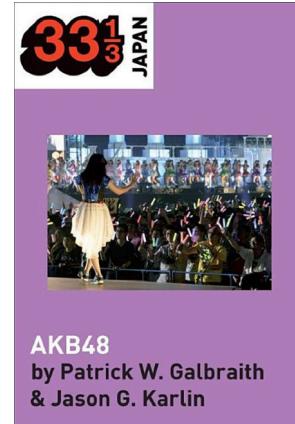
AKB48, by Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin

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AKB48 is a short monograph that is part of the broader series of books called “33 1/3 Japan.” This series aims to provide a deep dive into contemporary Japanese popular music, ranging from the soundtrack of *Cowboy Bebop* (the classic anime series) to the music of *Hatsune Miku* (a vocaloid star). This particular volume provides an in-depth analysis of the girl group AKB48 (so named because of its origins in the Akihabara district in Tokyo, and the originally intended 48 group members). While the subject matter of the book is analyzed academically, the content is fascinating enough (and the size of the book small enough) to appeal to a more general audience—particularly if they are fans of the band, or of Japanese popular culture more generally.



Formed in 2005, AKB48 is now the most commercially successful female group in Japan (which is itself the second largest music market in the world). This popularity alone is not necessarily worth scholarly analysis, but clearly Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin, the authors of this book, saw behind the success of AKB48 a greater and more fascinating business model in contemporary Japanese pop culture. This business model relies upon the idols monetizing their fans’ enthusiasm and affection through personalized interactions and fan-led elections to determine which girl gets top billing. The authors then utilize critical theory to extrapolate beyond this specific idol group to speculate about Japanese culture and beyond.

From the group’s beginning, the idols cultivated a sense of personal connection with their audience; AKB48’s slogan is literally “idols that you can meet” (*ai ni ikeru aidoru*). Their humble beginnings were in a small Akihabara theater where live performances took place in front of intimate crowds where idols could make eye contact with individual fans. Fans are encouraged to see themselves as supporters of a specific idol by calling out her name at live events, buying her specific merchandise, and visiting her at the special hand-shaking events where fans can both see their favorite idol up-close-and-personal and be seen by her, as well. The catch? Hand-shaking may only be accessed with the purchase of CDs packaged with special tickets for the events. To take things even further, AKB48’s overseeing company designed a General Election which allows fans to vote on which idol gets the top spot in the group—not unlike the highly successful

American television show *American Idol*, in which fans participate in voting for their favorite singer. Again, fans must purchase CDs with special ballots inside in order to participate in the General Election, allowing the group to monetize the fans' devotion to their particular idol and their desire to support her—both emotionally and financially.

Galbraith and Karlin point out that this style of interactive support is a key example of affective economics, which involves harnessing the power of a relatively small number of enthusiastic loyalists to monetize the relationship between them and their objects of desire. Some fans will buy hundreds of copies of the same CD in order to buy the chance to vote for their favorite idol; the actual content of the CDs, the music product itself, becomes secondary or even trivial. In fact, the idols are not known for being skilled singers or performers; instead, they are beloved for their relatability, their vulnerabilities, their intense striving to do better—hence making them girls who need the fans' support in order to succeed.

In essence, the idols are selling a relationship between themselves and their fans, similar to how in Japanese host clubs, the host (while actively convincing the patron to buy expensive food or drink) is selling the perceived relationship between host and patron, demonstrating yet another example of how affective economics are at play in Japanese culture. But even if the specific appeal of AKB48 seems largely limited to Japan, the rise of idol groups in South Korea demonstrates how this phenomenon is not specific to Japan.

AKB48 provides a fascinating look at the history of idols in Japan and how they led to the success of AKB48 in recent years. While the book clearly would appeal to fans of AKB48, pop idols, or the Japanese music scene in general, the authors do an excellent job of connecting the specifics of the band's business model and social interactions to broader concepts of business, marketing, economics, psychology, and sociology. *AKB48* could be used as an engaging case study for any of these fields, as well as for students of Japanese culture or music studies.

Amber A. Logan is a university instructor, freelance editor, and author of speculative fiction. In addition to her degrees in Psychology, Liberal Arts, and International Relations, Amber holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, England. Her thesis “Men Who Lose Their Shadows: from Hans Christian Andersen to Haruki Murakami” examines the intersection of fairy tales and near-future speculative fiction, and her debut novel *The Secret Garden of Yanagi Inn* will be published in October 2022.