



## **Representing Queerness in Japanese Media Cultures, 2010-2024**

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## Abstract

Since the early 2010s, Japan has been amidst a large growth in societal, political, scholarly and media discourse surrounding sexual and gender minorities known as the LGBT Boom, leading to a significant growth in media depictions of queer lives. The LGBT Boom is however not the first of its kind, rather it is the latest in a series of booms in interest in queerness in the media, politics and society since the 1990s. This thesis discusses the period between 2010-2024 to explore how queerness has been defined amidst the LGBT Boom and what this reveals about the cultural flows that shape its representation and role in the Japanese media. To do this, I deploy a modified version of the Circuit of Culture model proposed by a group of scholars including Stuart Hall in 1997. In the modified version of the model used in this thesis, cultural meanings are formed of the interactions between five key processes: signification, association, regulation, consumption and production. Each chapter of this thesis focuses on one of these processes by drawing on a different area of the media and how it connects to queer representation. To examine each of these areas I take a mixed methods approach that draws on both quantitative and qualitative data, including a 3,028-person survey; a large social media corpus; media texts; and in-person fieldwork. From my analysis, I identify four key elements to the definition of queerness in the Japanese media: ambiguity, a balance between multiple readings, fandom norms and *contents*. This thesis argues that queerness is, far from a subcultural preference or linked to certain niche genres, a core part of the Japanese media sphere and the cultural flows that define it.

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## **Notes on Language, Translation and Offensive Language**

### **Japanese Transliteration and Name Order**

Japanese terms have been transliterated according to the modified Hepburn system. Japanese names have, where a person is not known better by an alternative, rendered in surname-first name order as is typical in Japan.

### **Translation in this thesis**

Unless otherwise marked, all translations in this thesis from Japanese are my own. Where a translation comes from another source, or has been cross-checked against one, this has been noted and referenced. Finally, translations have been given for titles of works in Japanese in the bibliography following University of Sheffield guidelines. Official translations of the title have been used where available, maintaining grammatical errors that may be in the official English title, to ensure they can be more easily searched.

### **The Translation of Offensive Language**

At points in this thesis, though primarily in chapters three, four and seven, my analysis features discussion of comments left on social media, on my survey and in talk shows that feature offensive and incendiary language. In most cases, a direct translation was not necessary, but there are instances where it is important to highlight the types of offensive language used and what it suggests about queerness in Japan. Translation of such language is not an endorsement nor is it a condonement of it.

## 1. Introduction

### “Japan’s Unknown Massive Market: The LGBT”

So declared the start of a fourteen-page special feature in business magazine *Shūkan tōyō keizai* in July 2012 about the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community in Japan and its business and marketing potential. A bolded summary underneath further explained that the LGBT population of Japan was a “six trillion-yen market that has been left untapped” (*Shūkan tōyō keizai*, 2012a, p. 122) – a potential antidote to Japan’s otherwise shrinking market. This special edition presented the reader with two key framings – Japan is behind in its approach to LGBT issues, and that this is having a negative effect on the economic potential of the country. Thus, a recognition and understanding of this until now “unknown” LGBT market is needed to harness its economic potential.

The special feature argues that the limited legal rights that LGBT individuals had in Japan were holding back further business (and social) development. In a two-page article on same-sex marriage, the unnamed author declared that “Japan and Russia are the only developed countries to not recognise the rights of sexual and gender minorities legally” and referred to Japan as a “backwards country” (*kōshinkoku*) in the title (*Shūkan tōyō keizai*, 2012b). According to the editors of the *Shūkan tōyō keizai*, Japan needed to follow in the footsteps of other “developed” countries and thus legal protections were needed for LGBT individuals, although their primary focus is on LGB, rather than transgender, people. Their argument was that Japan cannot be a modern capitalist economy if it does not recognise LGBT consumers and provide legal protections to this important consumer base

The section ended on a two-page interview with one of the most popular gay media personalities in Japan – Matsuko Deluxe. An *onē*, a crossdressing gay man, Matsuko Deluxe has for some time been a recognisable representative of homosexuality in Japan, one whose popularity had grown over the course of the 2000s amidst a boom in similar *onē* representation. In this interview, Matsuko Deluxe expressed the view that there is “no discrimination against gays” (*gei e no sabetsu wa nai to omotte iru*), but that there was still a need for legal protections as the current systems make adoption the only



option for same-sex partners to have a legal connection (Matsuko Deluxe, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Matsuko Deluxe's interview reinforces this special edition's representation of sexual and gender minorities as a potentially monetizable audience, but one needing legal protections to make that possible.

This special feature is, in a vacuum, little more than a business magazine that sought to point towards business opportunities and potentials in Japan at a particular moment in time. The feature only took up a small section on the cover of the magazine, with most of the space instead being about how to buy small apartment buildings (*manshon*) ahead of an upcoming consumption tax rise. Perhaps the most notable element of the articles was the clear political stance regarding LGBT rights: that there was a need to introduce legal protections and some form of partnership system for same-sex partners. Yet, this special edition was also important as one of the earliest examples of a wider growth in public, business, political and scholarly discourse in the Japanese media since the early 2010s, known as the LGBT Boom (Okada, 2019; Abe, 2020; Maree, 2020; Kawasaka and Würrer, 2024b). When this collection came out, the term LGBT was relatively rarely used to refer to sexual and gender minorities in Japan (Abe, 2020); it captured a moment at which such terms broke through into the mainstream media.

In the twelve years since, the issues raised in this article remain relevant and at the forefront of Japanese discourse in the media and politics. Following Shibuya ward in Tokyo introducing the first local partnership system for same-sex couples in 2016, at least one municipality in all but a single prefecture in Japan, Miyagi, has followed. While lacking the same legal weight as marriage, these partnership schemes nonetheless provide some recognition for couples that have until now had none. Legal cases have also been brought, with some success, to courts in six major cities across Japan over the early 2020s (Taniguchi, 2024, p. 63).<sup>2</sup> In June 2023, the LGBT *hōan* (*Seitekishikō oyobi jendā aidentiti no tayōsei ni kansuru kokumin no rikai no zōshin ni kansuru hōritsuan*, 2023), ostensibly a bill to promote and provide some legal protections for sexual and gender

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<sup>1</sup> He also, in contrast to the tone of the special feature, distances himself from the term 'LGBT,' seeing it as too simplistic to paint all sexual and gender minorities in Japan under that umbrella (Matsuko Deluxe, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The rulings of these courts, which have broadly favoured the legalisation of same-sex marriage are at this stage more symbolic than binding – the government has not been forced to act and has appealed on rulings against them.

minorities was passed in the National Diet after multiple years of wrangling. While the final bill that passed was ultimately relatively toothless, only warding against “unfair discrimination” (Lies, 2023), it reflected a significant response to the rise in LGBT discourses in Japanese politics, media and society.

Japan is in a moment in which public discussion of sexuality and gender has come to the forefront. With this has come shifts in the broader representation of sexuality and gender extending far beyond just the groups that are covered by the term LGBT. The last decade has seen a marked shift in the broader representation of non-normative sexuality and gender, or queerness, in the Japanese media. With this, the way in which queerness is defined in Japanese media cultures, its role and the discourses surrounding it have fundamentally shifted. This thesis explores this shift through a range of examples of queer representation in the Japanese media over the course of the 2010s and early 2020s.

### **Background – Thirty Years of ‘Booms’**

The LGBT Boom is however not the first instance of a large growth in sexual and gender minority-related discourse and narratives in the Japanese media. While until the 1800s depictions of male eroticism (*nanshoku*) were not heavily regulated and somewhat common in some forms of art, by the latter half of century, such practices were increasingly seen as “vulgar” and in need of regulation by the government (Pflugfelder, 1999). While such restrictions did include a brief ban on anal intercourse in 1873, far more prominent were restrictions placed on representations of sexual acts. The Penal codes of 1882 and 1907 placed restrictions on “obscene” (*waisetsu*) depictions which broadly remain the same to this day, which were enforced and used to censor and suppress works featuring acts of male-male sexuality (Pflugfelder, 1999; Cather, 2012). The current penal code’s explanation of obscenity in article 175 – the article prohibiting obscene representations – is worded vaguely and focuses primarily on describing mediums of distribution rather than what counts as obscene. It is never entirely clear in the penal code at what point a work becomes obscene, but the effect of these codes has been felt nonetheless as depictions of sexual acts and genitalia remain censored in the Japanese media to this day (Cather, 2012; Sonoda and Dai, 2016). These codes are this not simply historical relics; they continue to be actively enforced to this day – especially on texts that show or describe genitalia and sexual acts (see Cather, 2012). Many of the cultural taboos surrounding representations of sexuality and gender, and by extension

queerness, that will be discussed in this thesis originate in this era of greater censorship and regulation. Such regulations contributed to shifting queerness in the Japanese media into being a taboo associated with perversion and deviance.

Alongside the increased regulation on depictions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries came a shift in how sexuality and gender was spoken of in the popular press. Same-sex relations were increasingly spoken of as a form of *dōseiai* (homosexuality) – a term that is imported from contemporary Euro-American sexological discourse (Pflugfelder, 1999, p. 175). A significant source of the growing interest in queerness came from a large increase in writings about same-sex attraction in the popular press, ostensibly in the form of sexological discourse on homosexuality (Pflugfelder, 1999, pp. 293–294; Robertson, 1999, pp. 10–12). For many readers, as Pflugfelder (1999, p. 294) notes, the appeal of these sexological writings was the “racy” content disclosed in their descriptions of same-sex love and in interviews with the “pervert” homosexuals themselves. Alongside these sexological works came literary treatments of homosexuality from authors such as Edogawa Ranpo, most notably in *The Demon of the Lonely Isle* (*Kotō no oni*), serialised between 1929-1930 (Angles, 2011). Such texts were fell under the umbrella term *ero-guro-nansensu* – erotic, grotesque nonsense – a reference to the how such sexuality was seen as perverse. With the shift towards seeing non-normative sexuality and gender as something perverse, so too came a growth in interest in queerness over the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – a ‘boom’ in queerness.

As will be elaborated on in chapter four, this boom also included discussions of female-female sexuality through the term ‘S’ – generally meaning sister - which referred to relationships between girls that blurred the line between homosocial and homosexual (Friedman, 2022, p. 28). Such relationships were visible in both literature of the era and in the popular press that covered dramatic stories of such relationships and their sometimes-tragic end (Robertson, 1998; Pflugfelder, 2005). Important to all of these examples is how non-normative sexuality and gender was treated as something fascinating and perverted – in-line with how the government had sought to regulate such depictions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. What we see in this period of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is also visible in the booms since the 1990s: an interest in the ‘voices’ of queer people; a close connection between the political context and the focuses of the era and the appearance of queer themes across the entire media sphere.

Increased censorship over the course of the 1930s and World War II would ultimately serve to push much of the above out of the public eye, engagements with same-sex romance in the popular media never faded entirely, and in the decades since the war there have been further moments of renewed interest and discourse in sexuality and gender across the media (Pflugfelder, 1999; Murakami and Ishida, 2006; McLelland, Suganuma and Welker, 2007; Angles, 2011; Maree, 2020). This thesis is set against the background of three ‘booms’ in the discussion of sexuality and gender that have occurred in succession over the past three decades: the gay boom of the 1990s; the *onē-kyara* boom of the 2000s; and the LGBT Boom of the 2010s and 2020s (Maree, 2020). Each of these booms represent a moment at which there was a groundswell of discourse surrounding sexuality and gender that then connected into organised socio-political action in the media.

The first of these booms, the so-called gay boom, can be traced to the early 1990s, which saw a growth of articles and scholarly discourse and memoirs written by sexual and gender minorities. While the term gay may imply that the focus was entirely on male homosexuality, the period also saw a growth in activism, life writing and discussion of issues surrounding both lesbian and transgender lives (Welker, 2017; Maree, 2020; Kawasaka and Würrer, 2024b). Queer theory also broke through into Japanese academia during this boom, with multiple translations rapidly published of major books and articles in the emerging field (Kaneta, 2019, pp. 118–119). In the popular media, the growth in queer representation was well reflected in the emergence of professionally published media that featured same-sex romances such as the Boys Love (BL) genre, which itself drew on male-male homoerotic fantasies that had grown in popularity since the 1970s (Welker, 2015; Fujimoto, 2020). Yuri - a genre focused on female-female romances - also emerged in this period, and popular anime such as *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997) and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997) featured same-sex romances between girls in their narratives (Friedman, 2022). The 1990s was a period then in which the media representation of same-sex romance was growing and spreading, with discussions of gender soon to take a greater prominence in the early 2000s.

Yet, the effect of this gay boom on political organisation proved to be more mixed in practice. Kaneta (2019, p. 117) suggests that activism in this period of the nineties actively sought to separate itself from politics, seemingly being more interested in visibility. However, as Maree (2020) notes, transgender activists sought to push for the

legal ability to change their gender. This became possible with the with the passage in 2003 of the Special Measures Act for the Handling of the Sex of those with Gender Identity Disorder (*Sei dōitsusei shōgaisha no seibetsu no toriatsukai no tokurei ni kan suru hō*, 2003, hereafter the Special Measures Act) though with violating restrictions that were partially overturned by the Supreme Court in 2023 (Endō, Shioiri and Negishi, 2023). Additionally, through the publication of magazines such as *G-Men*, newsletters and the formation of formal organisations, AIDS activism also developed greatly over the 1990s and into the 2000s (Ōshima, 2019, 2023). The effect of the boom on gay lives was more limited; no partnership laws mirroring contemporaneous ones in Euro-America, nor any significant legal protections were passed.

This lack of public recognition of LGBTQ+ identities continued into the next major development, the *onē-kyara* boom. Through the 2000s we see the emergence of a popular interest in crossdressing gay men through the boom in *onē-kyara* on television. *Onē* were not a creation of the media, existing within Japanese queer communities prior to the boom (Fotache, 2019; Maree, 2020, pp. 5–6), but the 2000s marked the moment they went mainstream in the media. These characters are marked by ‘feminine’ speech patterns, punctuated by a snarky and acerbic tone that is kept in check by self-censorship by the broadcasters, removing the excesses of the speech of the *onē* characters (Maree, 2020). Such depictions draw on long-held tendencies in the Japanese media to conflate sexuality and gender in depictions of male homosexuality (McLelland, 2000, p. 39), causing gay men to sometimes be depicted as existing almost between the binary genders of male or female. Even beyond the *onē* themselves, shows that depicted characters that showed some level of same-sex desire in this period tended to depict them in some form of drag or cross-dressing. For example, major manga franchises that originated in this period including *One Piece* (1997–present), *Gintama* (2003–2019) and *The Prince of Tennis* (1999–2008) all feature ambiguously gay men who cross-dress and often speak like *onē*. The 2000s marked a cultural moment in which these particular flamboyant and recognisable queer figures went mainstream.

This boom however was contemporaneous with a wider backlash towards policies that sought to promote gender equality (Yamaguchi, 2014). Itself born of a reaction to the passage of the 1999 Basic Act for a Gender Equal Society (*Danjo kyōdō kikaku shakai kihon hō*, 1999), this “gender free” backlash was heavily fuelled by conservative forces

which sought to confront what they saw as radical gender ideology that was destroying Japan (Yamaguchi, 2014; Maree, 2020; Shimizu, 2020). The gender free backlash played out not only in newspapers and on the political stage, but also in emerging internet forums such as 2chan (now 5chan) where anti-gender equality discourse flourished (Yamaguchi, 2014). Contemporaneous to the gender free backlash was the aforementioned passage of the Special Measures Act in 2003. That the gender free backlash occurred alongside the rise of *onē-kyara* and the passing of a bill that allowed transgender people to have their gender legally changed, highlights that the early 2000s marked a moment in which gender took a centre stage in Japanese public discourse. The cultural flows of the media and society became focused in on what gender could say about Japan, what it represented and how it reflected upon other perceived relative issues, including sexuality. That gay men in this period became typified by the *onē* is only one outcrop of the intense focus on gender, and the *onē-kyara* boom can in some ways be looked at as a part of a wider ‘gender’ boom in Japan.

“Japan does not think enough about gender” – this was a comment made to me in May 2024 by a member of the organisation whose money has funded much of my PhD. Such a comment almost seems inconceivable in the context of the above paragraphs, but the onset of the LGBT Boom in the early 2010s seems to have, at least initially, pushed gender as an issue affecting all Japanese society into the background once again. Instead, the focus of much public discourse turned to specific sexual and gender minorities, depicted through LGBT identities. As the introductory paragraphs of this chapter noted, this period has seen a growth of discourse alongside some limited legal and political advancements; when compared to the gay boom politics has taken the centre stage. This boom has run concurrently with global transformations around attitudes to LGBT people with the legalisation of same-sex marriage in various jurisdictions; the introduction of self-identification policies for transgender individuals; and the legal recognition of non-binary genders in several places. In Japan, the focus has primarily been on sexual identity and rights, with advances in transgender law and policy much more limited in scope.

Additionally, as the beginning of this chapter indicates, the LGBT Boom has also seen a greater focus on sexual and gender minorities as a market. Central to the Boom has thus been “pink money,” a term commonly used in Anglophonic discourses to refer to the capital held by LGBTQ+ consumers (*Shūkan tōyō keizai*, 2012, p. 125; Liu, 2023; Kubo

2024). Underpinning much of the political and economic movement throughout the LGBT Boom has been the potential of market mobilisation – greater LGBTQ+ rights can draw in queer consumers who will then spend money and grow the economy. Japan is following in the footsteps of major Euro-American economies that have sought to target pink money by increasing television representation and placing greater focus on LGBTQ+ rights (Branchik, 2002; Peters, 2011). At the same time, the focus on queer consumers as a specific market group also means lines are drawn to define who counts within it. To define this market, some groups of sexual and gender minorities are marginalised or cast out of focus - especially those who do not easily fit the categories covered by 'LGBT' (Peters, 2011, p. 206). Additionally, certain issues may be prioritised to present a progressive and pro-LGBT image – such as same-sex marriage (Peters, 2011, p. 206). For example, when Shibuya ward passed the first same-sex partnership system in Japan in 2015, the mayor openly acknowledged his aim was not to push for LGBTQ+ rights, but to bolster Shibuya's image as diverse and international (Kawasaka, 2024, p. 29). The passage of same-sex partnerships was a way to get greater access to LGBTQ+ consumers and the benefits they may have on both Shibuya's international image and its local economy. The open targeting of pink money by corporate, municipal and governmental forces has been central to the LGBT Boom and the social, political and economic changes that have come from it.

The effect of queer booms in the media sphere are not limited to the time-period they occurred in. BL, mentioned previously, exploded as a genre in the 1990s and continues to be popular today. For the female target audience, BL can act as a way to explore their own sexuality and gender through homoerotic fantasies (Mizoguchi, 2015; Sarracino, 2024). However, BL is not only shaped by this female market; it has also been influenced by its encounters with the gay community and the discourses that emerged amidst the queer booms. While BL has been criticised since the 1990s as appropriating the imagery of gay men for female fantasy (Vincent, 2007; Ishida, 2015), against the LGBT Boom, the genre is now increasingly acknowledging the role of being gay within it. The genre is not only highly internationalised (see Welker, 2019), within Japanese BL it is increasingly standard to feature at least one character who identifies as gay, or at the very least as being attracted to men. Amidst the LGBT Boom, the slowly growing trend of acknowledging the link between gay lives and these presumed female queer fantasies

has only accelerated and become a foundational part of the genre. As BL shows, what starts with one boom continues into the next and may shift and morph with that moment in Japan's society and media.

### **Boom and 'Bust'**

Maree (2020, p. 14) argues that these cycles of boom are a central element of the Japanese media sphere, with each boom making way for the next. Maree conceives of booms as part of commodification cycles, drawing on Yoshimoto's (1989, p. 9) conception of booms being about a "new difference" that is formulated and exploited until it runs its course, at which point a new one is fabricated and a new boom occurs (Maree, 2020, p. 14). At the same time, the contents of a boom still involves a repackaging of narratives that have come before, "repetitive performances" constrained by the norms surrounding sexuality and gender of contemporary society (Maree, 2020). One boom comes to an end and the next boom starts, a new unknown market is discovered and exploited in turn in a seemingly unending cycle.

Yet, such a perspective arguably places these booms, and their effects into overly discrete periods. It assumes that there is a period of boom, and then an inevitable point of "obsolescence" (Steinberg, 2017, p. 253; Maree, 2020, p. 14), a 'bust' which must follow. While the scholars who have written on these various booms rarely give an end date, there is still a presumption that these booms have, or will, come to an end as the commodification cycle comes to its end. But, as I will argue throughout this thesis, such a depiction overlooks the wider circuit of cultural flows that formulate cultural meanings. In the *onē-kyara* boom the figure of the gay never disappeared, but rather was subsumed into a greater cultural saturation of heavily gendered imagery. BL never lost popularity after the gay boom, it remains a popular and prominent genre in the Japanese media that has only continued to shift with time. Matsuko Deluxe has not disappeared, he remains a popular media figure and frequent guest on variety shows. Nearly two decades on, the same discourses that fuelled the gender free backlash are beginning to re-emerge, mixing with trans-exclusionary thought (Shimizu, 2020; Lifu, 2024; Würrer, 2024).

These booms are not just about specific sexual and gender minorities however, they are revealing of how non-normative sexuality and gender more broadly has become represented in the media. While gay, *onē* and LGBT may headline the booms, they have emerged alongside a wider rejection of cisgender and heterosexual norms over the past



three decades. As I demonstrate over the course of this thesis, rather than obsolescence, the shifting booms mask the re-commodification and recycling of the same narratives, shifted alongside the cultural emphasis of the era. They represent a cultural moment, one in which a variety of actors in society conglomerate around a certain understanding of what it means to be ‘queer’ and how it is represented in the media.

### **Aims and Significance of this Thesis**

There is a wide field of studies that have attempted to interrogate non-normative sexuality and gender in the Japanese media in recent years. These range from cross-dressing and cosplaying in various media forms (e.g. Azuma, 2015; Maree, 2020; King, 2023), to studies of BL (e.g. Mizoguchi, 2015; Welker, 2019; Hori and Mori, 2020a) or Yuri (e.g. Fanasca, 2020; Friedman, 2022). Alongside this, there have also been wider discussions of the impact of the LGBT Boom on the politics of queerness in Japan and its connection to the media and activism more broadly (e.g., Fotache, 2019; Okada, 2019; Wallace, 2020; Kubo, 2024). However, these approaches tend to focus in on one specific aspect of or genre within the wider media sphere rather than interrogating the way that queerness is defined across it. In the context of the booms described above, there is a wider question of not only the ways in which queerness has appeared in the media, but why it is represented the way it is. BL, *onē* and *Yuri* are all aspects of a wider demand for queerness in the Japanese media that has been visible in the booms of the last three decades. These booms reflect an underlying transformation in media representation, with significant implications on the circuits of cultural flows that construct meaning in society and the representation of queerness at a given moment.

This thesis focuses on Japan’s media sphere in the round, and specifically the cultural flows that construct queerness within it, focusing on the era broadly contemporary to the ongoing LGBT Boom, 2010-2024. I will discuss three key questions:

- What defines queer representation in the Japanese media in the period of 2010-2024?
- Who/what processes go behind this defining of queer representation?
- What does queer representation over the last fourteen years tell us about the relationship between queerness and the Japanese media?

While my approach focuses on a specific period, as indicated in the previous section, the aim of this thesis is not to understand the LGBT Boom as a discrete period separated from what has come before. Rather than constitute it as a “new difference,” this thesis suggests that it is one part of an unending chain of discourses surrounding sexuality and gender in Japanese society, the latest formation of meaning (Foucault, 1972). As such, rather than an all-encompassing theory of queerness in the Japanese media, this thesis captures a snapshot of the current state, outlining how this emerged at this particular moment, and suggesting what may come after.

### **Defining Queer**

This thesis focuses on media depictions of queerness which, when compared to terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender etc., is marked by far vaguer boundaries, and a rejection of ostensibly discrete identificatory markers. In an academic context the term queer was first used by Teresa de Lauretis (1991, iv), who separated it from terms such as lesbian or gay as a word that “is intended to mark a certain critical distance” from them. For her, lesbian and gay fail to capture the range of sexual identities and their histories; they are too limiting as a framework for studying non-normative sexuality and gender (de Lauretis, 1991).<sup>3</sup> To be queer is to go beyond conceptualising sexuality and gender as intrinsically about identity.

Thus, a key concern in queer theory is questioning identity-focused models for sexuality and gender in society. One approach is Sedgwick’s (2008) distinction between universalising and minoritizing views of sexuality. For Sedgwick, the minoritizing view looks at sexuality as something that is only relevant to the lives of a group of homosexual individuals, while the universalising view takes it as something crucial to people of a variety of sexualities (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 1). As such, a category like homosexual may be treated as a specific identity marker for those attracted to the same sex, but its meaning is constantly changing as the lines between heterosexual and homosexual are redrawn (Sedgwick, 2008, pp. 83–84). While heterosexual and homosexual are terms that organise one’s sexual preferences into a neat whole with a clear name queerness is defined by its disunity, being impossible to define in one, all-encompassing way (Sedgwick, 1993, pp.

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<sup>3</sup> Though de Lauretis would soon become critical towards the term queer as she saw it as becoming an identity itself (de Lauretis, Vincent and Niimi, 1998, pp. 68–69).

8–9). A queer approach can thus draw attention to lives that do not necessarily fit into the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Building on Sedgwick's approach, a queer perspective can also question the construction of identities themselves, and pull away from linking binaries such as male/female or hetero/homo to a perceived biological truth (Ayabe, 2006, p. 149; Jackson, 2006, pp. 41–43). This approach is most typified by the work of Judith Butler (1990) on gender performativity. For Butler (1990, pp. 191–192), gender is the result of a series of discourses and signs, sedimented over time, that have become naturalised as a representation of what it means to be a specific gender. Butler (1990, pp. 185–186; 1993, p. 22) argues that this “is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms,” and the practices, the signs, that produce gender are obscured to the individual themselves. Performativity helps us understand how identity is constituted, and can be applied beyond gender to sexuality, alongside a range of other identities in society. For example, we can use this approach to consider why gender or sexual identity itself becomes compulsory in society and interrogate the construction of them (Butler, 1993, pp. 21–22; Shimizu, 2007, pp. 505–506). A queer perspective can therefore look towards, and question, the formulation of identity groups such as LGBTQ+, and the reason they take a given shape in each society.

A queer approach does not however represent a total rejection of identity. Identity holds a value for not only simplifying the terms of discussion for those outside the minoritized groups, but also for self-understanding. The usage of an identity term can be a validation of an individual's existence and provide a way to comprehend and speak of who that person is. However, focusing on identity categories for media analysis can also be misleading as there are a wide diversity of sexuality and gender expressions that exist that do not fall neatly into a specific category. Identity categories can become another way to gatekeep certain forms of sexuality and gender expression by defining groups by whether they fit into LGBTQ+ or not (Makimura, 2015). While this study may be set against the background of the LGBT Boom, utilising the framework of LGBTQ+ leads to an approach that starts off in terms of set categories of gender and sexual minorities. Focusing purely on those identities may mean overlooking the diversity of ways that sexuality and gender has and continues to appear outside of these categories. Starting from a queer perspective not only highlights the diverse ways in which non-normative

sexuality and gender are depicted or catered to in the Japanese media, but also how these may relate to the present boom and its focus on identity.

### **Queering Japan: Why Queer?**

Amidst the development of the LGBT Boom and mainstream media discussions of sexuality and gender, this thesis thus uses a queer perspective to question the formation and circulation of these discourses. As Suganuma (2011, p. 345) suggests, queer is “a way of challenging narrowly defined identity categories such as gay, lesbian and bisexual.” By starting with a more vaguely defined set of boundaries, we can see the variety of ways that non-normative sexuality and gender appear within the Japanese media landscape. This includes going beyond what is traditionally included within LGBTQ+. For example, Galbraith (2019, pp. 6, 16) suggests that the male otaku challenges male Japanese heterosexual norms, being defined by their interest in the world of 2D characters, which he argues disrupts societal norms and is therefore possible to discuss through queer theory. As I argue later in the thesis, the fan cultures that surround the Japanese often seek to creating queer fantasies out of media texts. Additionally, discussions of queer people in Japan require consideration of those identified as x-gender. While these people position themselves as neither male or female, they are still defined by their positioning against the gender binary, and how they interact with, and are represented as part of the LGBTQ+ movement in Japan (Dale, 2020, pp. 64–65). While the LGBT Boom may suggest a growing affinity for identity-based media representation and activism, beneath the surface remains tensions about what non-normative sexuality and gender looks like in Japan and how it should be represented.

Another major approach to talking about sexuality and gender in Japan has been a focus on the issue of being/not being a *tōjisha* (lit. affected person). The term is widely used in the media for sexual and gender minorities; reports on LGBTQ+ issues in the Japanese news often refers to the members of the community they are reporting on as *tōjisha* (e.g., Park, 2023; *Tokyo Shimbun*, 2023; *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2023a). The term *tōjisha* plays an important role in debates surrounding who counts and who can speak for queer communities in Japan (McLelland, 2009). For example, when discussing BL media in Japan the question as to whose opinion counts is raised (McLelland, 2009, p. 200). This is seen in the debates since the 1990s that were touched upon earlier in this chapter surrounding the applicability of BL depictions to, and their connection with, real gay men

(see Lunsing, 2006; Vincent, 2007; Ishida, 2015). For some gay men, BL was appropriating gay lives in a way that was offensive, while for some consumers the men in BL were not meant to be gay so the genre has little to do with the gay community (McLelland, 2009, p. 200).<sup>4</sup> From a *tōjisha* perspective this raises the question of whose voice is important and who counts as affected by the depictions within – gay men or the consumers reading BL. Moreover, gay men and readers of BL are not a monolith, and it is not always clear whose perspective within these communities counts. What counts as correct representation and who is a *tōjisha* changes depending on the cultural and media conditions against which the category is being defined.

Looking at scholarship over the last decade, we can see a spectrum of approaches to understanding sexuality and gender in Japan. As previously noted, some scholars, such as Suganuma (2011, 2017) continue to prefer the term queer, a reflection of their critique in taking an approach focused on identity. While the term queer has largely seen limited popular usage outside of academic circles in Japan until now, it is nonetheless important as it provides a way to look at those who exist beyond the LGBTQ+ framing (Kaneta, 2019, pp. 118–119; Johnson, 2020, pp. 123–124). Moreover, in amidst the LGBT Boom, there has also been a recent growth in new texts taking queer approaches to Japanese society (Kawasaka and Würrer, 2024b, pp. 8–9). A significant number of edited volumes on queer studies in Japanese and English have also been released in recent years that have sought to apply the approach to the LGBT Boom and its effects (Ayabe, Ikeda and Seki, 2019; Kikuchi, Horie and Iino, 2019-2023; Kawasaka and Würrer, 2024a). There have also been several recent studies looking at sexual and gender minority communities in a variety of areas of Japan, from Tokyo (Baudinette, 2021), to the Kansai region (Wallace, 2020), to Tōhoku (Sugiura and Maekawa, 2022). Approaches to sexual and gender minorities from a queer perspective have expanded greatly in the last decade, which this thesis seeks to contribute to through its discussion of the broader Japanese media sphere.

The final point worth noting here is the frequently male-gendered nature of studies of sexuality and gender in the Japanese context. Female same-sex sexuality, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> The discourse described here surrounding BL and its connection to gay men is rooted in the *yaoi ronsō* of the 1990s, a series of debates originating in the small feminist journal *Choisir* in an article by a gay man bemoaning the genre (Satō, 1992; Lunsing, 2006; Vincent, 2007). Debates surrounding BL and its relationship with gay men would continue to turn up in works discussing sexual and gender minorities throughout the 1990s (e.g., Vincent and Kotani, 1996).

has received relatively less focus in an academic context (Pflugfelder, 1999, p. 25; Chalmers, 2002, p. 31; Garber, 2006, pp. 89–90; Maree, 2007, p. 293; McLelland, Suganuma and Welker, 2007, pp. 16–17), though works in this area have increased in recent years (see Welker, 2017, p. 160). This also extends to its depictions in the media; in contrast to the growing work on male-male romances, female-female ones, represented by genres such as *Yuri* have been the focus of significantly less research (e.g. Fanasca, 2020; Friedman, 2022). This thesis goes beyond a male-focused approach to sexuality and gender, integrating observations on a wide range of non-normative sexuality and gender in the Japanese media.

### **Normativity and Queerness**

I have been referring to the important of norms, a reflection of the central role of cisheteronormativity as a structuring force in societies. Popularised by Michael Warner (1993, xxi–xxiii), heteronormativity refers to the centrality of heterosexuality in and as constitutive of society, such “that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous.” Adding cis to heteronormativity acknowledges the importance of cisnormativity – the assumption that people’s gender and assigned sex are always the same – to heteronormativity (Worthen, 2016). Cisheteronormativity then influences how non-normative sexualities and genders are understood in society; as something that is abnormal, a minority, and leads to sexuality and gender politics that focuses primarily on identity (Warner, 1993, xxv–xxvi). LGBTQ+ lives are constructed as minorities that are defined by how they fail to meet the standards of ‘normal,’ by deviance from heterosexuality.

To combat cisheteronormativity, both activists and the media have often attempted to frame queer communities as also being ‘normal.’ Duggan (2002, p. 179) refers to this as homonormativity, criticising gay activism over the 1990s in America becoming increasingly focused on military and marriage access; becoming ‘normal’ neoliberal consumers. Homonormativity frames the homosexual as a fixed minority who are fighting for the right to be treated as equals in heteronormative systems, rather than attempting to question the systems themselves (Duggan, 2002, p. 190). Homosexual individuals only become acceptable once they are ‘normal.’ The motivation to become ‘normal’ then prevents a deeper questioning of cisheteronormative structures of society such as marriage and how it serves to regulate and legitimate certain forms of relationship

(Warner, 1999, pp. 109–112). By transforming homosexual individuals into a ‘normal’ member of society, they can also become a tool of nationalist discourse.

Puar (2007) highlights this through the term homonationalism, which she defines against the background of America during the war on terror in the early 2000s. Homonationalism refers to the discursive construction of the white American gay as a sexually exceptional individual, one whose experiences are to be privileged against other ‘backwards’ countries whose queer experiences are to be delegitimated (Puar, 2007, pp. 1–5). For example, she highlights the role of gay marriage in delegitimizing certain minority groups such as Muslims by suggesting that they are barbaric and uncivil compared to their white Euro-American counterparts who accept it (Puar, 2007, pp. 20–21). Homonationalism thus privileges the white American queer and incorporates them into nationalist projects, such as war. From cisheteronormativity to homonationalism, normativity is a central element of the debate regarding the ‘correct’ way of being for queer individuals. This can then feed into the media and what forms of queerness become visible in the media by whether they fit into these norms, or how they relate to them.

Normativity must not however be considered as something that is entirely unique to and always governed by cisheterosexuality. For example, Fielding (2020, pp. 1148–1150) discusses “queernormativity” in online social justice fandom, arguing that there are normative practices and identities within that challenge heteronormativity by creating new norms. Warner’s (1999, p. 116) critique of gay marriage provides an example of this when he argues that “it is not the way many queers live,” implying that he feels marriage to be unusual, not a normal way for most queer individuals. In pulling away from one norm, he argues from the perspective of another norm, one that he feels is separate from the “impoverished vocabulary of straight culture” (Warner, 1999, p. 116). What he argues for is separate from hetero- or homonormativity, but at the same time still ascribes norms to the queer communities he inhabits, how they express themselves and how they understand kinship. As is highlighted throughout this thesis, queerness is not only defined by cisheteronormativity, but oftentimes involves norms developed within communities focused on queer media. Understanding the flexibility of norms, and that they can be created even within minoritized communities in ways that still challenge cisheterosexual norms, is crucial to explaining how they then appear in the media.

Studies questioning normativity through looking at forms of Japanese mainstream media have highlighted the ways in which the media both legitimates and destabilises certain types of being in Japan. Maree (2020) provides an example in her earlier mentioned history of *onē* characters (what she dubs the ‘queerqueen’), underlining the potential role they have to question heteronormativity from within the mainstream media. These individuals are however still constrained as the queerqueen’s desire can never become too excessive for cisheteronormative media, or they will be censored or constrained in other ways (Maree, 2020, p. 166). Fanasca (2021) also highlights the possible ways in which normativity may be questioned within mainstream *shōnen* works, works made for a primarily young teen male audience. Discussing the muted sexualisation and the homosocial, potentially homosexual, bond between two female characters and the abject titan bodies, she highlights the possibility for queer readings of the manga series *Attack on Titan* (2009-2021), and texts in the *shōnen* genre more generally, that question societal norms (Fanasca, 2021). Yet at the same time, she also notes that this queer potential is rarely followed through on, potentially constrained by the need to appeal to a primarily male, teenage audience (Fanasca, 2021, p. 265). Potential challenges to norms are raised, but ultimately muted in favour of containing these representations within a normative framework.

### **Queer Approach of this Thesis**

This thesis thus defines queer as encompassing non-normative forms of sexual and gender expression in a cisheteronormative society. These non-normative forms of sexual and gender expression can range from same-sex attraction, to forms of romance involving 2D characters as the object of desire, to non-normative gender expression. Following its use both in studies of Japan and queer theory, queer is a fluid term that is not simply a synonym for LGBTQ+. It allows us to look at the wide range of non-normative possibilities for sexuality and gender as our starting point, rather than focusing specifically on more limited grouping of identities. Queerness is then the basis from which more specific conceptions of sexual and gender non-normativity emerge in moments such as the LGBT Boom.

### **Discursive Formation and the Circuit of Culture**

Central to discussing the construction of queerness, and how it emerges during certain periods of boom, are the processes and actors that are involved. These booms can be



considered as akin to what Foucault (1980, p. 112) refers to as a “regime [...] of knowledge,” a configuration of the discourses that make up meaning in society. Each boom coincides with a new formulation of “knowledge” surrounding queerness, which can also correspond with shifts in what “governs” these meanings and how power circulates in society in relation to them (Foucault, 1980, pp. 98, 112–113). In short, a look at the booms in sexuality and gender can be revealing not only as to how these concepts are understood in the media, but also in revealing how power circulates in Japanese society.

Key to the formation of meaning in society is what Foucault (1972) refers to as a discursive formation, a grouping of linked discourses that come to signify societal knowledge more widely. In analysing discursive formations, it is thus important not only to look at the content of a discourse, but also it links with previous discourses about a topic and how it may link with future ones (Foucault, 1972, p. 24; Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 276–279). Discursive formations are perpetual, they do not come to an end and there is no neat boundary to mark their limits (Foucault, 1972, p. 85). All discourses produced in a society, whether by the individual or by an institution, and become a part of a pre-existing formation, linked to what has come before.

This does not mean that discourses are homogeneous or static. While discursive formations can create seemingly monolithic understandings of certain concepts, the discourses within them are marked by the heterogeneity of their voices (Foucault, 1972, pp. 60, 121). This heterogeneity is what, in the context of the novel, Bakhtin (1981, pp. 262–263) refers to as heteroglossia, the variety of voices that can be found within a single, seemingly unified form. This heteroglossia is often obfuscated, however, by dominant narratives that make texts and discourse appear to have a single, seemingly unified form (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 342–343; Coates, 2012, p. 96). Thus, it is important not only to look at what a discursive formation reveals about meaning in society, but also who, or what forces, have been involved in shaping it.

Approaches to analysing the role of discourses, their formation and continuation are broadly termed as discourse analysis, which range from close readings of texts and their linguistic features to broader discussions of how discourses are linked into greater formations (Wodak, 2001, p. 9; Talbot, 2007, pp. 9–11). My approach to discourse analysis is heavily informed by the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and his

contemporaries. In the approach of Hall and his collaborators, the meanings of a text are not simply dictated by those who created it - what is encoded by producers may not be what is understood by consumers (Hall, 1980; Talbot, 2007, pp. 7–8). This approach to texts is encapsulated by Hall's (1980) influential encoding/decoding model, which describes the process behind the creation and dissemination of messaging in the media, with the encoding of meaning at one end, and its decoding at the other. On each end there are frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and the technical infrastructure, through which messages are both encoded and decoded (Hall, 1980, pp. 131–132). Encoding is, in this model, often connected to the “dominant cultural order” - similar to what Foucault described as a regime of knowledge - in society, which consumers may encode according to, in opposition to or through a mixture of oppositional and dominant codes (Hall, 1980). Meaning is not only generated by a single dominant actor, producer, or other group, but by the negotiation between the producers and consumers of culture who may generate mismatching meanings from the same text.

This model is not without its issues. It is not, for example, guaranteed that what is coded into the text at the production end is in line with the dominant codes of society (Pillai, 1992, p. 222). This can lead into an issue from the decoding end, an oppositional reading could still follow a dominant ideology, dependent on the text itself (Pillai, 1992, p. 232). Moreover, the two ends of the model and the processes on each end are relatively isolated in its initial formulation, the interactivity of media and the processes behind it are not entirely captured (Shaw, 2017, p. 596). While this framework reveals the ways in which different groups may decode the same representation, it does not describe the interaction between groups central in making the process of legitimating representations. Thus, this thesis turns to the Circuit of Culture (Figure 1.1), which iterates upon encoding/decoding, highlighting the circulation of meaning in society and the multitude of processes that go behind it.

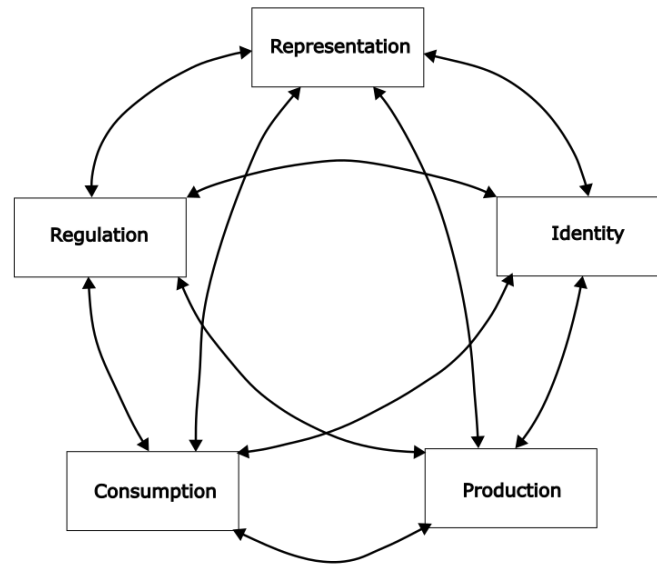


Figure 1.1: The Circuit of Culture. Adapted from (du Gay *et al.*, 1997)

Proposed in 1997 in the *Culture, Media and Identities* series of textbooks, the Circuit of Culture describes the process of cultural production across five different processes, or “moments,” and their interactions (du Gay *et al.*, 1997, p. 3; Hall, 1997a, p. 4). This model derives from Hall’s encoding/decoding model and the work of Richard Johnson (1986, pp. 46–47) on the production of culture as a circular process. Through looking at the processes of the model and how they interact, we can understand how cultural meaning is articulated and the groups that are involved in it.

The five key processes in the Circuit of Culture model are: representation, identity, regulation, production and consumption. Representation is how something is given meaning and is portrayed through the codes of a society in various formats, such as the media (Hall, 1997a, p. 4). Identity is the process by which a meaning is associated with some attribute (Woodward, 1997; Curtin and Gaither, 2005, pp. 101–102). Regulation is the restriction of cultural meanings, not only by legal and political regulations but also amongst groups such as consumers or fans (Thompson, 1997a). Production is creation, encoding and dissemination of a text (du Gay, 1997), while consumption is how a given stimulus is decoded, transformed and disseminated by those receiving it (Mackay, 1997; Curtin and Gaither, 2005, p. 101; Champ, 2008, pp. 86–87). No singular process is privileged and all five should be considered as interconnected (du Gay *et al.*, 1997, pp.

3–4). Each of these processes interact with each other to form a whole, which gets represented by a wider cultural understanding.

In this thesis, I use the terms representation and identity in different ways to the model, necessitating some adjustments to the model. I use representation to discuss the portrayal, or depiction, of something rather than the process of meaning generation described by the model. Similarly, identity in this thesis is primarily linked to terms such as LGBTQ+ and identity politics, rather than a process where texts and groups are associated with certain meanings. To ensure it is clear when I am referring to the circuit process, this thesis will use the slightly modified version of the Circuit of Culture seen in figure 1.2.

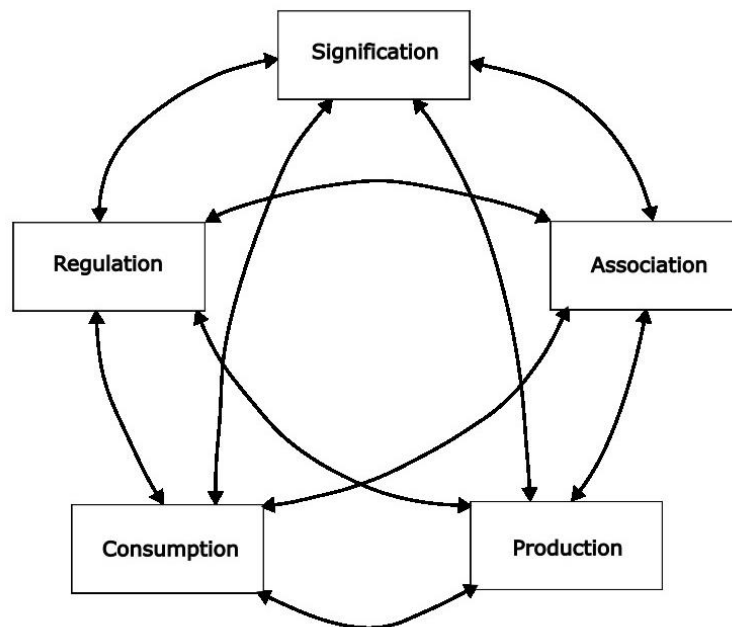


Figure 1.2: My modified circuit of culture model.

First, identity has been replaced with association. As noted above, identity in the circuit of culture model is closely linked to “positioning” and differentiation rather than an inscribed essence within a person, and often can lead to personal investment into it (Hall, 1994, pp. 394–395; Woodward, 1997). This positioning is never final however, drawing on Derrida’s (1982) concept of *différance*, it is not just about differentiation but all the deferring of meaning in an endless chain (Hall, 1994; Woodward, 1997). Thus, the focus is on issues of classification and differentiation (Woodward, 1997), the association of meanings with certain concepts and positions that shift constantly in society.

I have also replaced representation with signification, drawing on Hall's approach to the term in his textbook on the topic for the *Culture, Media and Identities* series. For Hall (1997b, p. 17), representation is the "production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language." Facilitating this is two systems of representation: the shared conceptual maps that we draw from in society and language, comprised of signs (Hall, 1997b, pp. 17–18). Thus, representation is what results of the linkage between these systems of representation and what is signified by it. What Hall (1997b, p. 42) adds onto the semiotic approach, is a focus on knowledge and power, which he derives from the previously discussed approach of Foucault. Meaning is formed by the link between a signifier (the object) and the signified (the concept), with that connection and how it is formed being closely influenced by issues of power and knowledge in society. In doing so, Hall arguably proposes a modified version of signification as his explanation of representation.

This modified circuit of culture will serve as the underlying framework for my approach to queer representation against Japan's LGBT Boom. The Circuit of Culture visualises the ways in which these meanings are circulated across society and how this then connects into certain formulations of what sexuality and gender means. It also highlights the way in which power and knowledge is distributed across society, they are not concentrated in any single actor or process but a network of different forces. In using the circuit of culture, focusing on each process through a connected case study, this thesis will trace the shifts in how queerness has been depicted in the Japanese media over the LGBT Boom. In doing so, I suggest that we can not only elucidate what defines queerness in the Japanese media, but why it has emerged in its present form and what this reveals about the role of queerness in Japan's media and the cultures that surround it more broadly.

### **Defining Ambiguity**

Finally, throughout this thesis, ambiguity plays a central role in how queerness is represented in the cultures surrounding the Japanese media, so I will briefly provide a definition here. Ambiguity arises at the point there are multiple readings to a single text, but it is not clear which reading is necessary correct as they are all equally "coherent and convincing" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1977, p. 10). Discussions of ambiguity in literature-based studies can be traced back to the work of Empson (1949) and his monograph *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, first published in 1930, which proposed looking at ambiguity through seven

different approaches. Beyond the book's eponymous seven approaches to studying ambiguity, Empson's key contribution was that he saw ambiguity as something that could be positive and productive for both the writer and reader, rather than simply a flaw or negative aspect of a text (Ossa-Richardson, 2021, p. 5). In doing so, he set-off a sequence of studies that sought to either critique or refine his arguments (Ossa-Richardson, 2021).

Some scholars sought to define ambiguity by focusing on the existence of mutually exclusive readings of the same text that cannot exist at the same time (e.g., Rimmon-Kenan, 1977; Rohmann *et al.*, 2024). In this approach, opposition between competing ideas is central to ambiguity; there is a clear divide between the possible readings of a text. By contrast, other scholars have suggested that ambiguity can involve readings that mutually support each other, and even when these meanings may seem opposed it is possible to audiences to reconcile seemingly contradictory readings (e.g., Kaplan and Kris, 1948; Budelmann, Maguire and Teasdale, 2016). This thesis draws on both perspectives – ambiguous texts surrounding queer representation often present audiences with seemingly mutually exclusive readings, for example a heterosexual reading and a homosexual reading of a relationship. However, as Sedgwick (2016) argues, the homosocial and homoerotic exist on a continuum that has been obfuscated in cisheteronormative society such that they appear mutually exclusive. The same is true of ambiguity in queer representation during the LGBT Boom; though the readings signified by a text may appear mutually exclusive they are often closely connected and sustain each other.

Central to ambiguity is thus that the meaning of a text is never fixed – there is always a struggle over what the signs within a text signify (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). This quality of ambiguity can be looked at through the concept of the “floating signifier” – what Lévi-Strauss (1987) refers to as a pure symbol that is not connected to any specific meaning. As Laclau (2004) argues, a lack of connection to a specific meaning does not necessarily mean that this floating signifier is “empty” or without any value, but that is a struggle occurring over the meaning of the signifier between different possible meanings. Where a floating signifier's meaning appears to be fixed, this is only “partial” and never total, being constantly influenced by the struggles over meaning in society (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014; Baran, 2022). We can

look at ambiguity through the lens of the floating signifier – as a text ‘floats’ between different potential meanings that are contested over by audiences and producers.

Ambiguity is closely linked to liminality; the meaning of a text is never fixed and is thus in a constant state of transition (Beech, 2011, p. 286; Thomassen, 2014, p. 7). Thus, ambiguity is closely connected to Derrida’s (1982) concept of “différance,” discussed earlier in this chapter, as the final meaning of a text is constantly deferred and never final. As mentioned above even if the meanings that could be read from a text may appear contradictory, they exist on a spectrum without a clear point of rupture. How the meaning of an ambiguous text changes is not always consistent either – as we have seen with gender issues in this chapter it is not always the case that the direction that signifier moves in is “positive” (Thomassen, 2014, p. 8). What is central to ambiguity is the suspension of meaning between narratives and that a text is constantly in transition between potential meanings, existing in a liminal state.

In this thesis, I thus define ambiguity as the presence of multiple readings of a singular text that may appear to be mutually exclusive but exist in continuity with each other. An ambiguous text ‘floats’ between several readings as audiences, producers and other parties tussle over the signification of meaning and the associations made with a sign. Even when it may appear that a text has reached a final meaning however, such moments of fixity are short-lived. The transition between readings is ongoing and not always predictable, and thus key to the study of ambiguity is looking at the tussles that go behind the reading of a text. Such ambiguity is central to queerness in the context of the LGBT Boom.

### **Thesis Structure**

As mentioned above, this thesis aims to provide a wide survey of the representation of queerness in the Japanese media, through the Circuit of Culture approach. To do this, I will look at five case studies that each connect heavily to one of the processes within the Circuit of Culture. These are political/societal attitudes to queerness to address association; the anime studio Kyoto Animation to address signification; space in the media sphere to address regulation; media mix marketing to address consumption and the broadcaster TV Asahi to address production. While each of these cases focuses on one element of the circuit of culture, they also point to a connected Japanese media sphere within which queerness plays a major role.

Chapter three sets the stage for the thesis, drawing on a large survey of 3,000 respondents that questioned them both on their views and understandings of queerness and the ways that they reacted when shown examples of queer media representation. Through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of this survey, I highlight two key elements to how participants associated meaning with queer representations in the media. Firstly, participants reacted more positively to issues surrounding sexuality over gender. Same-sex marriage seemed to have positive associations for participants, especially when compared to discussions of gender and transgender based issues. Alongside this was a preference for representations that maintained ambiguity; for example, a same-sex kiss for example was judged by respondents to be more acceptable the less 'real' and explicit it was. Despite the prominence of discourse surrounding sexuality and gender during the LGBT Boom, participants still showed a preference for ambiguity and the ability to ignore, or even reject, the existence of queerness in a media text.

Building on this background, chapter four turns to the works of major anime studio Kyoto Animation, focusing primarily on issues of signification and language. Through the swimming series *Free!* and the concert performance series *Sound! Euphonium*, this chapter highlights how the texts produced by the company are constructed to be both read as both completely queer and simply homosocial simultaneously, albeit perhaps by different audiences/consumers. This is reflected in not the only series themselves, but the ways that Kyoto Animation staff discuss the series in publicly available interviews. There is a balance evident in the approach of Kyoto Animation, with their texts seemingly seeking to appeal to distinct audiences – one seeking a completely cisheteronormative sports anime and another a queer coming-of-age story - through the availability of multiple readings.

This balancing act is connected closely to the ways in which queerness in the media interacts with spaces both online and physical. Chapter five looks at this through a focus on space, both online and offline. First, I look at the difficulties of regulation in fandoms online through the BL fandom of rap-idol series *Hypnosis Mic* and a moral panic on X/Twitter around pornographic images being potentially seen by minors. Fandom norms are central to communities surrounding queer media, but online spaces make their maintenance difficult and can amplify moments of crisis in fandom cultures. The issues



with online spaces then necessitates the need for spaces that can balance queer desires and the need to exist within ‘normal’ society, which is somewhat fulfilled by anime meccas such as Ikebukuro. This area of northwest Tokyo has a heavy focus on the presumed female fan and her queer fantasies, both between male characters in the texts she consumes and through her own desires for two-dimensional characters. Within its boundaries, these desires can be publicly indulged and are supported in a space set aside from ‘normal’ society where they might typically stay hidden. In this chapter I will show how space and regulation interact with queerness through the discursive construction of the region by both municipal and corporate forces, as well as consumers. Ikebukuro encapsulates the important role that balancing between different groups plays in queer representation and the creation of spaces for its consumption. It is not only a balance between cisheteronormative and queer communities and practices, but also between different types of queer desire.

Queer desire is also central to media marketing and merchandising in Japan. Chapter six turns to the media mix with a focus on the series *Yowamushi Pedal*, a high school road cycling series for which queer fantasies plays a central role to how it is merchandised and marketed. The merchandise of the series is designed to support multiple forms of queer fantasy – both between the characters and with fan desires for individuals, without privileging one reading overwhelmingly. This necessitates a balance to be maintained between different forms of queer consumption and, by extension, means that the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal* never makes its queerness completely explicit. Thus, I argue that queerness represents a form of *contents* (*kontentsu*), a term used to describe commodities created from culture that holds great importance in the strategies of media corporations in Japan (Steinberg, 2019, pp. 31–32, 65).<sup>5</sup> Queer *contents* are both built upon both fan desires for something that turns away from cisheteronormative reality and the desire of producers to exploit that desire for monetary game.

The connection between *contents* and queerness amidst the LGBT Boom is expanded upon in the final case study of this thesis, the broadcaster TV Asahi. One of the largest private broadcasters in Japan, TV Asahi has embraced the centring of queerness

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<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to use *contents* (*kontentsu*) rather than the singular form content in reflection of both how in Japanese the word is always in the plural, and that for Japanese media conglomerates the term *contents* almost always has the implication of a network of commodities being created (Steinberg, 2019).

in its outputs since 2016 as a source for content and a way to draw people back into its sphere of influence against the flow of people “leaving” television (Tse, 2024). In doing so, TV Asahi, and its connected streaming services have openly embraced not only queer narratives, but specifically LGBTQ+ ones in its outputs. This is particularly reflected in their outputs in the Boys Love (BL) genre since 2018 and through partnered channels in their wider network. At the same time, their approach is highly targeted and differentiated. While on one platform they may frame themselves as pro-LGBTQ+, on another they will platform or embrace anti-trans narratives.

Bringing these case studies together, this thesis argues that queerness is fundamental to and central within the Japanese media sphere and is constantly being commodified and turned into content for audiences to consume. This is more than just a genre-based or subcultural consumer orientation but is more endemic. The booms that surround it may reconfigure the way queerness is spoken about and framed, but its centrality the Japanese media persists. We are amidst thirty years of queer booms with no corresponding ‘bust,’ simply a shifting set of lexicons and discourses with which queerness is conceived of and becomes increasingly embedded within the Japanese media. The LGBT Boom represents the latest version of this, while the nature of these narratives is regularly constrained and policed into forms that are appropriate to the aims of a wide variety of different actors and groups. Queerness in the Japanese media is, I argue, hidden in plain sight, always present, but constrained and regulated into forms that become understood within the context of a series of interconnected ‘booms.’ Access to these narratives is ultimately most available to those who have the monetary ability, location and knowledge to most engage with queer content and the narratives they represent.

## **2. Methodology**

This study of queerness in the Japanese media makes use of both qualitative and quantitative data, taking a mixed methods approach. Individual chapters of this thesis deploy methods such as survey analysis in chapter three; textual and discourse analysis in chapters four and seven; and a mixture of fieldwork observations and corpus-based social media analysis in chapters five and six. Each methodological approach contributes one part to better exploring how the five key processes in the Circuit of Culture model - signification, association, regulation, production and consumption - shape cultural meanings. Moreover, these methods reflect the range of the media covered in this thesis, from political media to television broadcasting to media marketing. By integrating a variety of methodological approaches, this thesis is better able to interrogate the role that queerness plays in the Japanese media and why it is depicted in a certain way in the LGBT Boom. I argue that queerness is central to the Japanese media sphere, and to demonstrate this I have taken a diverse, mixed methods approach to the circuit of culture.

This chapter outlines the main methodological approaches I have used. First, I provide an overview of why mixed methods are important for this thesis, locating it within an approach based around convergence rather than validating one type of data over the other (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p. 65). Next, I introduce the main qualitative and quantitative methodologies of this thesis, and how they connect to the circuit of culture. This includes a discussion of how I collected my data and my fieldwork in Japan. Finally, I provide an overview of the ethical considerations surrounding the data collection performed in this thesis.

### **Mixed Methods**

As mentioned above, this thesis integrates both qualitative data, such as anime, social media posts and published interviews, as well as quantitative data drawn from surveys and corpus analysis - a mixed methods approach (see Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Previous approaches to queerness in the Japanese media written since 2010 have primarily taken a qualitative approach (for example, Hall, 2013; Maree, 2020; Kubo, 2024), with quantitative studies more limited in number (for example, Yamaoka, 2016, 2019; Satō and Ishida, 2022). While researchers such as Kamano (2008, 2019; Khor and Kamano, 2021) frequently make use of both types of data, it is rarely in the same article or study.

By taking a mixed methods approach, I provide a perspective to studying queerness in the Japanese media that has been underexplored in previous studies.

The mixed methods approach of this thesis builds from what Creswell and Plano Clark (2018, pp. 65, 68–69) refer to as “convergent design,” wherein the collection of quantitative and qualitative data is done simultaneously and the analysis of each type of data is integrated. There are variations in convergent approaches, in some instances the quantitative and qualitative data are collected at the same time but separately from one another (Morse, 1991, p. 120). In other convergent approaches, such as the one taken in this thesis, the quantitative and qualitative data are constantly influencing each other. The findings of a qualitative data set may influence the collection of the quantitative data and vice versa (Sammons *et al.*, 2014, p. 568; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p. 74). For example, as will be described in more detail late in this chapter, I collected a corpus of 980,579 tweets between August 2022 and April 2023 about the high school road cycling series *Yowamushi Pedal*. Throughout the collection period, I sampled the corpus and used quantitative forms of textual analysis to establish key trends and topics in the fandom and adjusted my fieldwork based on what I found. As it became clear that trading was a central part of fandom activity, I placed more emphasis on how fans exchanged goods and the role of producers in facilitating this in my qualitative analysis.

The convergent approach contrasts to a sequential approach where the data is collected in-sequence over two phases – a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase. In this approach, what is found in one phase directly influences the next phase, but data is collected sequentially at different times (Morse, 1991, p. 120; Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006). While sequential approaches allow for interesting results from the first phase to be explored in detail in the second phase, such an approach risks overly privileging one type of data depending on the order of data collection (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006, pp. 4–5). The quantitative data may simply act to validate the qualitative data and vice versa depending on the order of the phases. Moreover, once one phase is finished, you should not go back to further collect data for it based on the results of the second phase. This thesis seeks to contrast and compare, allowing an exploration of what each form of data demonstrates, how different forms may conflict with each other and what collectively this reveals about queerness in the Japanese media. As such, I considered a convergent approach where both forms of data are collected simultaneously to be more

appropriate for this project. While not every chapter features both forms of data, I do not privilege one form over any other.

The convergent approach also highlights the potential for integrating quantitative data into queer research while avoiding overly positivistic framing. A relative lack of quantitative studies is a wider issue in queer research more broadly as the need for the creation of categories and groupings to create data can conflict with a queer approach that questions identity and its construction (see Browne, 2010; Guyan, 2022). The lack of engagement and familiarity with quantitative approaches can then become an issue when attempting to contest queerphobic sentiments spread using misinterpreted statistics, suspect data practices or positivism (Guyan, 2022, pp. 14–15). This thesis contributes to the wider field of queer studies by highlighting how quantitative data can work with a queer approach and be integrated with qualitative analysis.

A mixed methods approach also fits the diverse processes of the Circuit of Culture model well. Association, for example, looks at what meanings are identified with what things, how texts, groups and concepts are classified and differentiated and the reasoning behind this (Woodward, 1997, p. 12). From a mixed methods perspective, a textual analysis can highlight potential associations within a text while a quantitative approach can collect data as to what consumers themselves think on a wide scale. The former provides insight into why a particular association may be made, while the latter lets us investigate what associations people form in practice. This mixed methods approach to association, is used in chapter three when discussing depictions of same-sex kissing and the reactions of consumers to it. The Circuit of Culture and the processes within are well-suited to a mixed methods exploration that considers each part of the model using both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Discourse Analysis**

One of the central approaches of this thesis is discourse analysis. As discussed in chapter one, discourses are what underpin the formulation of meaning in society (Foucault, 1980, pp. 112–113). Each discourse adds to a wider field of discourses that are linked to each other and form discursive formations that shape meaning (Foucault, 1972). Discourses come from a multitude of places, from television broadcasts to advertisements to daily conversations with friends and colleagues. When looking at the media, how a given text is understood is not only shaped by the people creating it, but by the discourses that

surround it which can include producers, consumers, legal bodies amongst others (Talbot, 2007, pp. 7–8). Key to understanding discourses and the formations that they constitute is the way they link with each other.

Discourse analysis is used across most of the chapters of this thesis, connecting with all the processes in the circuit, and is central to how I interrogated the construction of meanings in a text. One example of how this approach can be applied may involve analysing the language of a television programme that refers to the relationship between two female characters as defined by their “love” (*ai*) for each other. Interviews with creatives on the show may suggest this word does not signify explicit romantic love, but instead an intense homosocial relationship. Yet, for consumers, they may instead discuss the relationship as explicit, romantic love and understand the language as signifying that. There are conflicting discourses surrounding the text and its relationship with queerness. Understanding the representation of this relationship involves looking at how these perspectives are linked to each other and what this suggests about queer representation. This example is drawn from chapter four, which looks at the signification process of the Circuit of Culture and what it reveals about romantic language.

In contrast to the above qualitative approach to discourse analysis, it is also possible to take a more data-driven, quantitative approach to it. Computer-aided discourse analysis is one example of a quantitative approach to discourses. In a computer-aided discourse analysis, large datasets are used to analyse patterns in language through discourse analysis, drawing on a corpus-based linguistic approach (Stegmeier, 2012; Cheng, 2013). A corpus-based approach to discourse allows us to not only draw on individual examples, but also to analyse the features of the language within and the how certain words and phrases are used on a wide scale (Fitzgerald, 2023, pp. 698–699). The linguistic features and trends within a corpus can be analysed using quantitative methodologies, ranging from frequency counts of common words to the statistical analysis of how certain phrases connect. In this thesis, computer-aided discourse analysis is employed in chapter six to analyse how consumption occurs within media fandom and how fans shape the way a work is understood and represented.

### **Quantitative Text Analysis**

Computer-aided discourse analysis in this thesis was primarily conducted using the programming language R, making use of a corpus of 980,579 tweets collected between

August 2022–April 2023 on X/Twitter.<sup>6</sup> These tweets were collected through a program called TAGS (Twitter Archiving Google Sheet), a template that can be downloaded and used through Google Sheets to scrape tweets using key words and hashtags (mhawksey, no date). TAGS was used to collect tweets about the high school road cycling franchise *Yowamushi Pedal*, the focus of the sixth chapter. Tweets were collected at a rate of 3,000 per hour based on whether it contained one (or more) of four search terms: “yowape,” “yowapeda,” “yowamushi pedaru,” or “#yowamushi pedaru,” all common names for the franchise.<sup>7</sup> This was timed against the release and airing of the fifth season of the anime adaptation, *Yowamushi Pedal Limit Break*, from October 2022–March 2023. Additionally, against the background of COVID, this corpus proved a crucial way to understand fan behaviour where social distancing measures made in-person participation in events difficult or altered the nature of fan interactions.

The tweets were stored in two CSV files and then combined and cleaned using the R programming language. This cleaning involved removing any tweets that were incorrectly included from a previous test run, removing retweets, punctuation, hashtags and a tweet posted by a bot 55,241 times. The total number of tweets after cleaning was 321,028.<sup>8</sup> To separate each word within the text for analysis, the software library RMeCab with mecab-ipadic-NEologd, a dictionary including a large number of neologisms, installed was used (Kudō, 2013; Satō, Hashimoto and Okumura, 2016, 2017; Satō, 2020; Ishida, 2024). MeCab is a natural language processing tool that allows for sentences in Japanese to be separated word by word, using a connected dictionary to recognise them – RMeCab simply allows MeCab to be operated through R.<sup>9</sup> The mecab-ipadic-NEologd dictionary includes both a significant amount of online slang and the titles of popular media texts. With the standard MeCab dictionary, *Yowamushi Pedal* is

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<sup>6</sup> The ending of collection in April 2023 was due to the implementation of prohibitive fees to access the X/Twitter API.

<sup>7</sup> Due to space limitations on the TAGS sheet, the Google sheet was downloaded and restarted when the document reached over 500,000 tweets.

<sup>8</sup> A separate corpus for hashtags was also made with 376,269 tweets listed – the bot had not used hashtags, so its tweets were simply made blank during processing.

<sup>9</sup> To provide slightly more detail, MeCab is a standalone program that can be launched without needing to use R, but it is difficult to process large datasets through this and the results are not saved in a form that can be easily analysed in a different piece of software. RMeCab is a library of functions that allows the user to interface with and use the features of MeCab through the R programming language and load the results into an R programming environment – which for this thesis was RStudio.

separated into *Yowamushi* and *Pedal*, but they remain a single word when processed with mecab-ipadic-NEologd. The cleaned data, with the words in each tweet separated out, formed the main corpus from which analysis of what consumption by *Yowamushi Pedal* fans reveals about queer representation in the media was performed.

Analysis on the corpus was done using quanteda, a package of tools that allows for a variety of forms of quantitative text analysis to be performed with relative ease (Benoit *et al.*, 2018). In analysis performed using quanteda, every word in each text in a corpus is treated as a “token” which can then be used for further analysis and manipulated in a variety of ways (Benoit *et al.*, 2018). Aside from basic frequency analysis, I also used collocation analysis and semantic text networks.

Collocation analysis creates lists of words that are strongly associated with and used together in texts. This analysis can both be used to find compounds that are not in the MeCab dictionary, such as unique fandom terms, and to find terms that are strongly connected to each other in the text, like pairings of character names. For the purposes of this thesis, a detailed description of the statistical underpinning is unnecessary, but the significance of a collocation is measured by a statistic marked as *z*. The *z* statistic, described simply, measures how far from the expected mean frequency a collocation is (Martínez, 2008). A larger *z* number indicates a statistically significant collocation (Xiao, 2015). For my analysis, I followed the suggestion of the programmers in considering results greater than three as statistically significant (Benoit *et al.*, no date).

Alongside collocation analysis, I used semantic network analysis, which is used to analyse the relationship between words, terms and phrases with others and from this a network graph can be drawn that visually depicts these relationships (Drieger, 2013; Bayrakdar *et al.*, 2020; Etaiwi and Awajan, 2020; Benoit, Wang and Watanabe, no date; Watanabe and Müller, no date). The resulting graphs are formed primarily of nodes (the terms) and edges (the weighted lines that connect them) and provides a form of analysis that allows for us to draw conclusions about the wider network of connections between words in a corpus of texts. Figure 2.1 is an example network graph, drawn from comments left by the survey discussed in chapter three that mention the term LGBT. In the top left of this graph, we can see that transgender (*toransujendā*) is connected in these comments to inflammatory language such as “sex offender” (*seihanzaisha*) and spaces such as “toilets” (*toire*). The term transgender is also connected to the word “women” (*josei*),



suggesting that my respondents are likely to be repeating anti-trans talking points that portray trans women as a threat associated with trans-exclusionary and gender critical feminisms (Thurlow, 2024). In my qualitative analysis of these comments in chapter three, I found such anti-trans sentiment in many comments, with the rhetoric used matching the language found on the graph. Semantic network graphs provide a useful tool for visualising the connections made between key terms in large corpuses of texts.

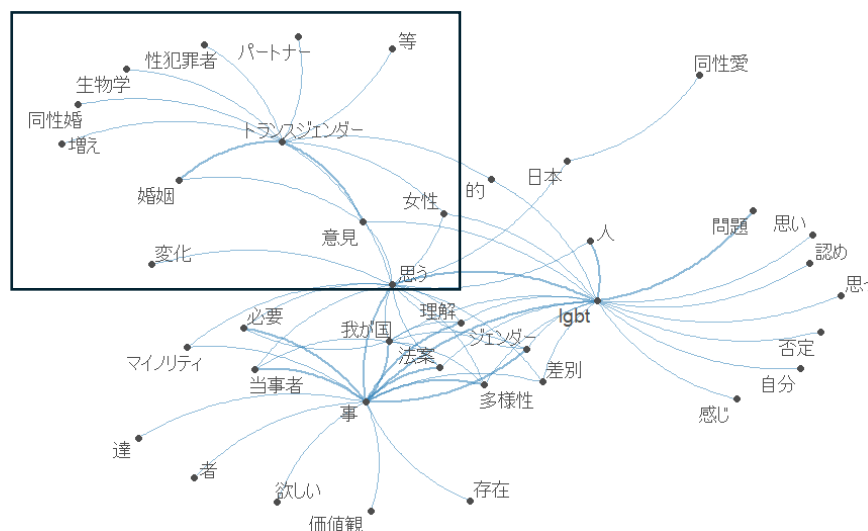


Figure 2.1: An example of a semantic text network graph drawn from the 125 most frequently used words in the comments left on the survey used in chapter three that mentioned the term ‘LGBT’. The section marked in the top-left are the terms connected to the word transgender (*toransujendā*).

In contrast, a collocation analysis simply provides a list of words and phrases commonly used together but does not provide information about how these words and phrases are used by the users in my corpus. In a collocation analysis, we may know that two words are commonly used together, such as exchange (*kōkan*) and handover (*jōto*) in my corpus, but not how these are connected in practical use. A semantic network graph gives shape to the underlying quantitative data, providing a visual depiction of the connections between words, simplifying qualitative analyses of the connections between concepts in corpuses of data (Bales and Johnson, 2006, p. 460; Drieger, 2013, pp. 7–8). While it is possible to produce a table summarising the statistical connections between words (known as a co-occurrence table), these can be difficult to parse, especially so with a large corpus. Semantic text networks provided a visual way to analyse and understand

a corpus of texts, the connections between words, and how certain terms were being used by consumers.

Through my large corpus of tweets, my research was able to better capture the broader dynamics within the *Yowamushi Pedal* fan community online and what this revealed about their relationship with queer representation and consumption more broadly. This corpus-based approach was used in conjunction with the outlined qualitative approaches to discourses and texts.

### **In-person Fieldwork from the Margins**

I spent September 2022–September 2023 based in Sendai while making frequent trips to other regions when possible. Over the course of my fieldwork year, I was able to make eight trips to Tokyo, two to the Kansai region where I visited Osaka, Kyoto, Uji (where the studios of Kyoto Animation are) and Kobe, and one to Nagoya. I also made trips to Fukushima city and various localities around Sendai – for example there is a large shopping centre with several popular culture goods stores in the nearby town of Rifu. In contrast to previous studies that have focused on or heavily feature Tokyo (for example, Suganuma, 2011; Ishida, 2019; Baudinette, 2021), this thesis has been heavily shaped by my experiences living and doing research in Sendai and the northern Tōhoku region.

For much of its history, the Tōhoku region that Sendai is the largest city within has been at the margins of Japan, an area that produced crops such as rice for other, ostensibly more important parts of the country (Hopson, 2017, pp. 75–76). Alongside this the region is often stigmatised as backwards and behind the times – something palpable in conversations with people in the city and writings on it (Hopson, 2017, p. 77; Sugiura and Maekawa, 2022). As Sugiura and Maekawa (2022, pp. 12–14) note, there is a dichotomy of “progressive Tokyo (big city)/behind the times regions” that pervades research and activism around queerness in Japan, with Tōhoku one of these “regions.” Living in Sendai provided a vastly different experience of queerness in Japan, including in the media, as the effects of the LGBT Boom were, even in 2022–2023, less visible than in Tokyo. For example, the last prefecture in Japan to contain no municipalities where same-sex partnerships are recognised is Miyagi, of which Sendai is the capital city. My experiences of Sendai have shaped my analysis, even where it is not directly stated, and were central to the way that I chose to approach my fieldwork and data collection.

## **Observation in the Field**

While discourse analysis is the main qualitative method employed in this thesis, there are also sections in chapters four, five and six based on in-person fieldwork and observation. My approach to observation drew primarily from ethnographic approaches to participant observation. In traditional participant observation, the ethnographer may spend an extended period of time in a particular area, embedding themselves into the local community and forging connections with key stakeholders (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010; Shah, 2017). Approaches to participant observation vary, for some scholars the focus is on the participation – the researcher should involve themselves in the activities of their informants (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998, p. 248; Nabhan-Warren, 2022, p. 29). For other researchers, the focus should be on observation and while researcher can involve themselves in the activities of their informants, doing so is not a necessity (Delamont, 2004, p. 206). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to participant observation and while long-term integration and close cooperation from invested informants may be the “idealized” form, it is not always the reality (Eriksen, 2023). My approach to field observation sought to adapt participant observation around the needs of my research – a mixed methods study based primarily in Sendai.

Being based in Sendai meant that my in-person observations of events were more “patchwork” in nature, with me needing to dip in and out of the capital (and other major cities) where most events were held due to my personal circumstances (Günel, Varma and Watanabe, 2020). Moreover, as COVID-19 restrictions were still in place until late into my fieldwork certain activities commonly witnessed in previous similar research were restricted or did not happen. For example, Giard (2024) witnessed significant interaction between fans in similar spaces to the ones I discuss in chapter six, but these activities were frequently banned or restricted during my fieldwork period as a COVID-19 precaution. As a result, I was selective about when and where I performed observations and typically did so around important events. I also built repetition into my research – visiting the same places or same types of events and observing how those have changed and what behaviours I could consistently see in them. My approach drew some inspiration from what Coates (2017, pp. 117–118) refers to as “idleness” – situating oneself in specific locations that were “representative” of the communities being studied. Similarly, I focused on staying in or visiting a limited number of “representative” locations and

types of events when doing fieldwork. For example, while I did go to several cities as mentioned earlier, whenever I was in Tokyo I spent much of my time in Ikebukuro, visiting the same stores, parks and areas of the region. I took a similar approach to *Yowamushi Pedal*, generally attending the same types of events where possible. In chapter six, I will discuss a type of themed anime and manga café known as a collab café that were regularly held for *Yowamushi Pedal* throughout the year I performed fieldwork. I attended four of these cafés for *Yowamushi Pedal*, and a further seven for other series during my fieldwork. Over the course of my visits to these cafés I became familiar with not only how they worked, but what sorts of people attended them and how *Yowamushi Pedal* cafés differed from those for other series. By repeatedly attending the same spaces, I was able to build a better understanding of how consumers used them, how they changed over time, and what they revealed about queerness in the Japanese media.

The events I attended were identified based either on my X/Twitter corpus by analysing important trends, or through accounts I followed on X/Twitter that frequently tweeted about important events. How I identified fan behaviours at these events also drew from my corpus – I expected to see behaviours spoken about in the tweets in fan spaces. Most of the collab cafés discussed above were identified through tweets by fans about them on X/Twitter. Additionally, I chose to focus on texts and spaces that I had a previous familiarity with to ensure I was well-acquainted with what events were important and when the best timing was to make trips to other cities. In chapter five I discuss the relationship between queer media and Ikebukuro, where I had previously lived during my master's degree between 2019 and 2021. Similarly, my choice of *Yowamushi Pedal* was partially based on my previous knowledge of the series, having followed it in various forms since 2017. In both instances I had previous familiarity that made it possible to effectively identify key moments to travel for fieldwork outside of Sendai.

Moreover, in a similar fashion to Purkarthofer (2019, p. 62), I found that that people's experiences in the spaces I went to were often mediated through screens - people spent much of their time on their phone, interacting with others via social media sites like X/Twitter. It was not uncommon for themed cafés for *Yowamushi Pedal* to be mostly quiet outside of looping background music and the odd comment made between those who had come with friends. Moreover, a significant number of participants at the events I attended for *Yowamushi Pedal* came alone and intended to spend their time alone. At

the aforementioned collab cafés, for example, participants would spend much of their time setting up the merchandise of their favourite character or coupling of characters and taking photos of them with the food and drinks they ordered. As I will discuss more in chapter six, while at these events fans appeared to be focused on creating an exclusive space for themselves and the characters they are interested in that was not to be intruded. As a researcher, my writing acts as a way of mediating to others what I experienced in the field and what these experiences reveal about the Japanese media and society more broadly (Geertz, 1988, p. 1; Purkardthofer, 2019, pp. 57–58). How I approached observation needed to be adapted for the spaces I inhabited to be as accurate to my field as possible. My fieldwork sites featured participants who spent much of their time not necessarily wanting to be disturbed. I thus sought to take an approach that balanced between active participation and ensuring I did not overstep the boundaries of other participants.

On days when I was performing observation, I primarily noted my experiences through a mixture of fieldnotes and photographs. My fieldnotes were, where possible, written while I was doing observation and based around my immediate reactions to what I had observed. These were dated and named for the location that the observation was done. While it is not uncommon for fieldnotes to be written significantly later and even on a different day and in flowing prose (Mulhall, 2003; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010), my aim was to capture what I observed as authentically as I experienced it. As such, my notes were primarily written in bullet points and took an informal tone; the writing style sometimes reflecting my own personal sense of humour. My fieldnotes, combined with data drawn from my corpus before and after an observation, then guided how I approached similar spaces afterwards and what I identified as important fan behaviour.

While my written fieldnotes are similar to what DeWalt and DeWalt (2010, pp. 160–164) refer to as “jot notes,” rough descriptions taken on the day, my notes were typed on my phone and were written such that they would be understandable to people other than myself. Additionally, I did not heavily edit my notes after the fact – only adding additional bullet points where necessary:

Goods are bought on a sheet all at once.

- I.e. there are no additions - you must buy everything at once.
  - I wonder if this is meant to be playing on fear of missing out?

The TV is playing trailers for Limit Break throughout.

- This was the only thing that was playing throughout. (12/10/2022 Fieldnote)

Alongside my written fieldnotes I took extensive photographs of most spaces I observed. Some of the photographs taken during the observation the above note came from are at the start of chapter six - I also took pictures of the “sheet” referenced here. The photographs thus served two key roles: firstly, they made sure I had images of key items that I could not retain – the “sheet” above was a sheet I had to hand in to complete the order. Along with the fieldnotes, photography provided a chance to look back upon key moments and scenes in my research after the fact, reevaluating my experiences after other experiences in the field (Basil, 2011, p. 251). My photos themselves constituted a form of fieldnote, a visual record of what I experienced and felt important in the moment (Basil, 2011, p. 252). Through my fieldnotes, both text and visual, I sought to best capture the spaces I experienced and what they revealed about queerness in the Japanese media.

For my approach to observation, I heavily drew on what Klasto (2021) refers to as “active shyness,” an approach that intentionally avoids the centre of activity, sitting at the sidelines and speaking with others in that position. However, where I slightly differ from Klasto is that in many cases I also aimed to stay quiet and avoid speaking until I was spoken to. My quiet approach had two key advantages: first it avoided me overstepping boundaries while pandemic restrictions were still in place. As a foreign male in spaces dominated by Japanese women, this alone tended to attract me some level of attention. For example, at the various events for *Yowamushi Pedal* I found staff tended to pay me more attention than other customers. Secondly, my approach allowed others to engage on me in their own terms. In a pandemic situation, being approached may have been uncomfortable for many, and the set-up of events themselves often heavily discouraged it. As was noted above, many participants came alone and seemed to be engrossed in a space they did not want someone else entering.

My approach was also partly informed by a consistent difficulty I encountered with potential research participants and organisations due to its explicit focus on queerness. In practice this was almost always understood as being about LGBTQ+ people, perhaps inevitably given the ongoing LGBT Boom. I found most attempts to arrange interviews were ignored or rebuffed – one media-linked organisation told me they did not deal with topics related to sexual and gender minorities, even though they ostensibly

should have. This was a major constraint on certain elements of my research and was a major motivator for my approach to observation.

From observing people in themed cafés to conversations with my former host family in Nagoya, each part of my experience during my year in Japan helped build a picture of how queerness is understood in a range of scenes of daily life. Through observation, I sought not only to get a better sense of how queerness is consumed, but also to see how it is woven into everyday life. As I discuss in chapter five, what you see from representations of certain spaces and media from the outside can often be misleading as to the dynamics surrounding queerness in Japan when on the ground. Throughout sections of chapters four, five and six, in-person observations have been woven in to provide more detail on how signification, regulation and consumption interacts with queer representation, and the importance of physical spaces in the media.

### **Survey Analysis**

The final major methodology I deployed was a 3,028-person survey distributed online in September 2023 on queerness, the media and representation. Respondents were recruited by age group (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+), with the size of each group being based on the proportion of the population they made up in the 2020 Japanese census (Sōmushō tōkeikyoku, 2022). This survey, discussed primarily in chapter three, provides a wide range of potential quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Beyond asking for basic information on an individual, data on their media consumption habits, political support and recognition of key terms was also collected. The collected data allowed for me to correlate certain patterns of media usage and political affiliation to people's opinions on queerness. Analysis of the correlations found in my data were done through multi-variable correlation tests that looked at the connections between several independent variables, such as genres enjoyed, gender and age, and a dependent variable, such as support for depicting sexual and gender minorities in children's media. My quantitative data was then connected with qualitative data that provided additional context and analysis to the result of the regression analysis. A result, such as that Boys Love (BL) media readers were more likely to support same-sex marriage, provides a data point that can be connected to qualitative analyses of BL content in the Japanese media sphere.

Alongside the collection of data on participants' media habits, political opinions and recognition of key term, three additional experiments were performed. These sought to see what people associated with depictions or discussions of queerness and how this may affect their answers to questions around sexuality and gender in the media and society. This approach builds on studies that have sought to understand the effects of American television programs such as *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) on attitudes to sexual and gender minorities (e.g. Cooper, 2003; Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes, 2006). For each of the experiments, participants were randomly sorted into equal sized groups, one of which was a control group that was only shown the final question. Those not in the control group (the treatment groups) were shown an image, GIF or section of dialogue depending on the test, asked some questions about it and then asked a final question about a broader topic regarding sexuality, gender and the media in Japan (Figure 2.2). The mean results of each treatment group and the control group were then compared through a t-test to establish whether there is a statistically significant difference between them.<sup>10</sup> A statistically significant difference suggests that seeing or reading queer representation may affect one's attitude. One of the three tests, which looked at whether participant's felt that sexual and gender minority representation was common in the media, has not been used in this thesis' analysis. Statistical analysis revealed little correlation between being shown the sample text and respondents' answers to the final question, likely due to the choice of texts shown to the participants. The other two tests – which asked about representations of same-sex kisses in the media and participant's opinions on gender – both provided results that suggested a clear connection between the image or text shown and the final question. Through my analysis of the results of two of these tests in chapter three, I elucidate what meanings are associated with queer representation and how seeing such depictions affected my participant's views.

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<sup>10</sup> Within this thesis, a result of  $p < 0.05$  is considered a statistically significant result for t-tests and correlation analysis.



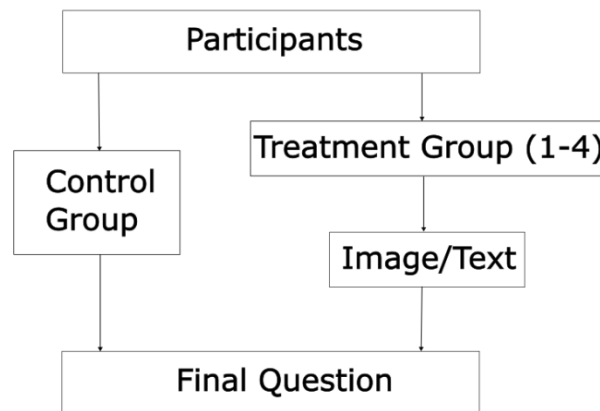


Figure 2.2: Basic structure of each experiment in the survey.

Finally, the survey allowed for comments to be left by respondents with their thoughts on issues connected to sexual and gender minorities not covered in the survey. These comments provided a chance for a discourse analysis of participants' viewpoints that were not captured by the choices presented in the survey. 1,131 respondents left a comment, which will form part of the discussion of the results of the survey in the next chapter. These comments were revealing of not only the way people understood queerness and what referents they were using to do so, but also the associations people made between sexuality, gender and the media.

### **Ethical Considerations**

With the wide range of methodological approaches employed in this thesis, this has also required significant consideration of ethical issues surrounding the types of data I collected and the way I did so. Social media data is one example of this. On a social media platform like X/Twitter, it is not always clear what counts as public data that we can use and, if we do, what may be the potential consequences (Taylor *et al.*, 2023). Posts on social media platforms can range from personal comments meant for a smaller inner circle to provocative statements meant to promote wider discussion. When working with big datasets like my corpus, it was not feasible to individually check the content of nearly a million tweets. Furthermore, as recent discussions around AI on sites such as X/Twitter highlight (e.g., Kan, 2023), users are not passive to the unauthorised collection and usage of their words and art. While social media posts may be public on many platforms, that does not mean the users perceive their posts as something to be scraped and analysed, regardless of whether the platform allows us to do so. Data collection and presentation

thus must consider both the need to consider the ethics of presenting and analysing social media posts, as well as that of collection itself.

This thesis takes as its baseline the guidelines proposed by the Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines (see Franzke *et al.*, 2020). This means focusing on anonymisation and the reduction of any identifying information, when possible, based on context. I primarily followed the suggestions of Özkula (2020, pp. 84–85), who proposes considering context in three ways: data, cultural and commercial. For the former, this considers how the post can be looked at as data, such as if storage of usernames is necessary, the type of user (corporate or individual) and the methods of analysis. Cultural context is the norms of a specific national or linguistic grouping, in this thesis primarily Japanese, and commercial context is the ownership and its shifts. Through these measures, it is possible to consider the context of a given post, how it should be presented, and the level of additional protection required. In some cases, complete anonymity and no direct links to posts may work better. Many of the accounts in my corpus have a tiny number of followers - even this thesis would be more attention than some of these tweets got when they were posted. In such cases I omitted the username in the analysis, the language was either not quoted or translated without the Japanese original provided. In other cases, such as a TikTok video with millions of views, anonymisation techniques will be of little use as the post is popular enough to be easily recognised regardless. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and this thesis reflects the need for sensitivity to ethical principles in considering how best to handle a wide range of disparate data.

Another area requiring ethical consideration was how I approached consent, both in my in-person fieldwork and my survey. Informed consent is a central tenant of research in any field involving human research, ensuring that participants understand the research that they will be voluntarily participating in, its methods, goals and the benefits and drawbacks of doing so (Plankey-Videla, 2012, pp. 3–4; Nijhawan *et al.*, 2013; Bell, 2014). In interviews consent may involve having a participant sign a form after reading a detailed information sheet outlining the study. In online surveys informed consent may be recorded by having participants check one or more boxes to confirm their understanding of the study (McInroy, 2016, 2017; Mondal, Mondal and Soni, 2023). My research followed both practices, with information sheets and informed consent forms in both Japanese and English for interviews, and a requirement that the participant confirm their

understanding of the study for the survey before proceeding (see appendixes A, C and D). In all cases, through emailing me a person could instantly end their participation – a person may agree to an interview or to fill out a survey but may change their minds later or not have fully understood how their words would be analysed (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018, p. 123). All my information sheets, consent forms and the survey included an email that could be used to contact me to request the removal of data or ask any additional questions about my research. My study was additionally approved by the ethics board at the University of Sheffield, and the survey ethically approved by both the University of Sheffield and Tohoku University. Through taking these measures, I sought to ensure that informed consent was clearly recorded and that all participants were aware of the context of my study.

Even with approval for your research and pre-prepared information and consent forms, managing informed consent is not without its difficulties, however. Connected to issues of informed consent in ethnographic observation is whether the researcher should be open in their position, or be covert and obfuscate their intentions (Roulet *et al.*, 2017; Nabhan-Warren, 2022, pp. 32–33). A covert position, though useful in many situations, is not however ideal – a participant has the right to know they are being observed (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010, p. 215). However, as has been noted earlier in this chapter, in many of the spaces I observed due to COVID-19 restrictions attempting to actively inform all other people present that I was a researcher would not only potentially be unwanted, but it would also involve breaking the official rules of or expectations around etiquette in the spaces I was in. I conducted my research in-line with the rules of the spaces I observed and would openly bring my position up as a researcher should a participant speak to me while I was doing an observation. For example, when attending the store for *Yowamushi Pedal* publisher Akita Shoten I was asked by the cashier why I was interested in the series, I disclosed that I was doing research. Otherwise, my role as a researcher remained unspoken. As the people around me could not have consented to me recording their words, I have generally avoided exact transcriptions of things that I overheard and instead used paraphrasing and summary observations to describe the dynamics of these spaces. Through my approach to observation in the field, I sought to ensure that any potential effect on my participants was minimised to the greatest extent possible.

## **Conclusion**

My thesis argues that to understand queerness, and how it is represented in the media, necessitates an engagement with the multitude of processes and actors that go behind shaping the media, culture and society. This study discusses representations of queerness in the Japanese media by framing its analysis through the Circuit of Culture model. My methodologies reflect the diversity of the model, deploying mixed methods. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data allows for further exploration of the discourses surrounding queerness in society. The aim is not to use one methodology to simply validate the other but to highlight what each approach can reveal about the circuit in the round.

In the chapters that follow, my argument is structured by this mixed methods approach to the circuit of culture. Chapter three focuses on association and is based around the survey and the quantitative and qualitative results within it. Chapter four looks at signification through the studio Kyoto Animation and a more qualitative, discourse analysis of two of their works. Chapters five and six mix observation, discourse analysis and corpus-based discourse analysis in their discussions of regulation and space. Finally, to discuss production I bring together both discourse analysis of TV Asahi and connect it back to themes seen in the survey. I argue that through this diversity of methodological approaches, we can come to a better understanding about how queerness is represented in the Japanese media amidst the LGBT Boom and what queerness can reveal more broadly about the Japanese media and cultural circuits that it is central to.

### 3. Association: Queerness and Political/Societal Attitudes

In June 2023, the “Bill Regarding the Promotion of Understanding Amongst Citizens on the Diversity of Sexuality and Gender Diversity,” more commonly known as the LGBT *hōan* (lit. bill) was passed (*Seitekishikō oyobi jendā aidentiti no tayōsei ni kansuru kokumin no rikai no zōshin ni kansuru hōritsuan*, 2023). The bill, while ostensibly a statement of the government’s commitment to sexual and gender diversity in Japan, broadly lacked any substantive new regulations or the power to enforce them (see Jōjima and Takebayashi, 2023; Lies, 2023; *Tokyo shimbun*, 2023). Members of the conservative government of Japan led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) sought to greatly water down the bill, removing or rewording significant sections. This was partially enabled by the centrist and conservative opposition parties in the Diet, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) the largest of these, who joined by adding their own amendments to the bill (Matsuoka, 2023). As a result, references to cooperation with local LGBTQ+ organisations were removed, and the bill now only prohibited “unfair discrimination” (*futō na sabetsu*). The final version creates leeway for discriminatory acts to be condoned so long as they are not “unfair;” the bill is presented as promoting diversity but features a key carveout that ensures the status quo is defended.

At the centre of the debates surrounding the bill was the wording used for gender identity. In the first draft of the bill, gender identity was rendered as *seijinjin* - whose kanji literally means gender self-recognition - a word that emphasises self-identification. Conservative parts of the LDP sought to have this changed to *sei dōitsu sei*, which can also translate to gender identity, arguing that *seijinjin* would allow for men to claim that they are women and enter single-sex spaces (Fujisawa, 2023; Nishio, 2023). Opponents to the LGBT *hōan* claimed that the use of *seijinjin* in the bill meant that businesses would be punished if they stopped “men in female clothing” (*josō shita dansei*) from entering women-only spaces, leading to “chaos” in single-sex spaces across Japan as it would no longer be possible maintain sex-based restrictions (Iida and Sasaki, 2023; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2023a). Online platforms, talk shows and magazines then spread panic about the word *seijinjin* further with unsourced claims about unspecified “incidents” (*jiken*) in countries that had changed their laws to allow trans people greater self-identification (Iida and Sasaki, 2023; Ono, 2023; Yamaoka, 2023; “Hashimoto Tōru x Inada Tomomi” LGBT *hōan* de rakugo undō!? Omoi to ha/tekigō shujutsu wa jinken shingai?”, 2023).

The 'solution' proposed by opponents was the removal of *seijinin* from the bill and an allowance for “discrimination” so that they could prevent these supposed “incidents” from occurring in Japan (Iida and Sasaki, 2023; “Hashimoto Tōru x Inada Tomomi” LGBT hōan de rakugo undō!? Omoi to ha/tekigō shujutsu wa jinken shingai?”, 2023). The opposition to *seijinin* formed one part of a trans panic in Japan in which greater rights for trans people were associated by voices in the media with danger for women.

In practice, the LGBT *hōan* made no specific changes to the nature of single-sex spaces and held no significant legal weight to enforce its guidelines, nor did it make any changes to how gender is legally defined in Japan (Ono, 2023; Tokyo Bar Association, 2024). Moreover, even if the bill had held such powers, research performed in areas where self-identification principles govern same-sex spaces has shown no rise in sexual assaults or danger to women (Hasenbush, Flores and Herman, 2019). The panic that surrounded the term *seijinin* was based on a misunderstanding of the bill and its powers. Eventually, as a compromise, the term *seijinin* turned into the katakana loan phrase *jendā aidentiti* (gender identity), a term that had been amongst the JIP’s suggestions (Matsuoka, 2023). In contrast to the more specific *seijinin*, *jendā aidentiti* reflected a watering down of the original bill, with the final wording a loanword that may not have as clear of a meaning.

The bill’s passage was closely linked to the delayed 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the 2023 G7 meeting in Hiroshima, with the government seeking to present a tolerant face to the international community through passing it (Nikaidō, 2021; Fujisawa, 2023; Taniguchi, 2024, pp. 64–65). As one reporter for the *Mainichi Shimbun* noted in March 2023, the bill was attempting to “protect Japan’s international image while placating its conservative wing” (Fujisawa, 2023). Even watered down, the bill was still heavily opposed by large parts of the LDP, with opponents heavily attending meetings within the party to voice opposition, creating a caucus in the diet to “protect women’s spaces” and boycotting the final vote (Chiba, 2023; Matsuyama, 2023; Sankei Shimbun, 2023). Even with the changes to *seijinin*, conservative opposition continued as the phrase *jendā aidentiti* was treated as too vague and thus perceived as open to the same abuse as *seijinin* (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2023b). The final bill pleased few, LGBTQ+ groups saw the bill as toothless and having worsened wider discourse around sexual and gender minorities due to the debate over *seijinin* and the wording of “unfair discrimination” (LGBT hōrenpōkai, 2023; Lies, 2023; Pride Japan, 2023; *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2023a; *Tokyo shimbun*, 2023).

The LGBT *hōan* represents the contradictions inherent in how queerness is defined and regulated in Japan. The LGBT *hōan* both seeks to be identified as something that is progressive and that advances sexual and gender minority rights, while lacking any real power and being filled with questionable wording that is at odds with how communities themselves describe their identities and communities. The LDP seem uninterested in pursuing actual material change in the rights of sexual and gender minorities, reflected in the debacle over the LGBT *hōan*.

However, while the LDP may push for at best shallow changes, this does not necessarily reflect the desires of the voters, despite the party's large majority in the Diet. This chapter puts the political, media and corporate issues that will be discussed throughout this thesis into the context of the wider Japanese population itself with a focus on the association process of the Circuit of Culture model. Through a 3,028-person survey, I will discuss how people react to depictions of queerness in the media in the context of these shifting public understandings of sexuality and gender. From this, I seek to highlight what people associate with queer representations in the Japanese media and the effect this has on their understandings of sexuality and gender more widely.

This chapter focuses on the association process of the Circuit of Culture model. As explained in chapter one, I have replaced the term identity with association in my modified Circuit of Culture model. Doing so avoids overlaps in the usage of identity to refer to the process described in the model, and identity to refer to the social, economic and political labels that are often the end result of the process. Additionally, association places more emphasis on the process described by identity - the classification and differentiation of groups, texts and other cultural artefacts by associating them with certain meanings (Woodward, 1997). For example, as described above, during the debates surrounding the passage of the LGBT *hōan* the term *seijin* became associated with danger and chaos by conservative forces who saw the word as a challenge to gender norms in Japan and as enabling 'men' to access women-only spaces. In this chapter, I look at what associations my respondents drew when discussing queerness in the Japanese media, as well as broader society. I also apply quantitative methods - regression analysis and t-tests - to look at why certain associations are drawn by my respondents and influencing factors. By focusing on association, this chapter highlights how my

respondents understand queer representation and what their responses reveal about the role of queerness in the Japanese media.

This chapter discusses three areas of my survey. Firstly, I focus on the politics of queerness, what policies people support and how this then connects to and is reflected in media representations of these issues. I then connect these issues and the opinions of my respondents on them into a discussion of free-form comments left on my survey by 1,131 participants on their opinions surrounding sexuality and gender in Japan. From this, I argue that there is a separation forming between approaches to sexuality and gender. While same-sex marriage has broad support gender-based policies are less so and through the comments on my survey, seem to bely an anti-trans sentiment emerging within the media. This continues into two tests performed to see how certain media representations, one on gender and one on sexuality, affect their understandings of queerness in society. From these tests, I highlight a key definitional element of queerness in society – ambiguity, which I briefly provided an overview of in chapter one. Queerness is supported so long as it remains abstract to the viewer and possible to deny.

### **Outline of the Survey**

This chapter draws on an online survey performed between the 6-7 September 2023, which achieved 3,028 complete responses.<sup>11</sup> This followed a pilot survey performed in August 2023 on 500 people that tested the survey design. The survey was publicised via the Yahoo! Crowdsourcing platform – an online site connected to Yahoo! where participants are offered small financial rewards for responding to questionnaires. The financial reward for this survey was provided through PayPay points (1 yen = 1 point). These points can be used on the eponymous QR code payment system, which is closely connected to Yahoo! and major telecommunications company Softbank and had over 60,000,000 registered users by October 2023 after launching in 2018 (PayPay, 2023). 10 points were provided as a reward for answering, in-line with other surveys on the platform. There was little evidence from our results that this was seen as too little; only a very small number of participants commented as such in free-form comments on the survey. Services like Yahoo! Crowdsourcing have grown in popularity in recent years in political science

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<sup>11</sup> There were 3,511 overall responses, however of those 483 were left uncompleted and have been removed from the data.



as a swift and cost effective way of conducting surveys (Inagaki, Takikawa and Ōbayashi, 2020; Asano, Ōmori and Kaneko, 2023).<sup>12</sup> As Asano, Ōmori and Kaneko (2023) show in their comparison of survey methods in Japan, surveys from platforms like Yahoo! Crowdsourcing show little difference in their results to traditional surveys provided appropriate weighting is performed.

Yahoo! Crowdsourcing provides a variety of additional options for defining who can answer a specific survey. This allowed for data to be collected by age-group, with listings for 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+, with the number of participants advertised for being weighted according to the 2020 census data (Sōmushō tōkeikyoku, 2022). Age was chosen over gender to weight the data as Yahoo! Crowdsourcing only allows for data collection to collect by whether the respondent is male or female, meaning that there was no way to easily include respondents who did not identify as either. Respondents on platforms like Yahoo! Crowdsourcing also tend to skew young, so collecting by age ensures a sample that both includes older voices and is representative of the age dynamics of the Japanese population (Asano, Ōmori and Kaneko, 2023). Moreover, the data used for weighting, the census, only collected data on whether someone was male or female. As such, it is not possible to accurately weight by gender when, as in this survey, respondents could select options other than male/female. As the data was collected by age and not gender, there is a skew towards male participants (63% of the sample). Outside of this 36% of participants were female, 0.4% nonbinary, 0.17% x-gender and 1.29% outside of these categories. Where relevant the effect of gender has been accounted for within the formulas used to account for the potential effect the gender dynamics of my sample may have. The final breakdown can be seen in table 3.1, with the data having respondents aged between 18 and 80, and the mean age 51 – slightly higher than the census mean of 49.

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<sup>12</sup> Another commonly used platform is Amazon Mechanical Turk (see Inagaki, Takikawa and Ōbayashi, 2020).

**Table 3.1: Breakdown of respondents by age**

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
<b>18-24</b>	6.21%	188
<b>25-34</b>	11.33%	343
<b>35-44</b>	15.36%	465
<b>45-54</b>	17.78%	538
<b>55-64</b>	28.87%	874
<b>65+</b>	20.44%	619

The survey was split into three major groups of questions: basic data, media habits and politics and the media effects experiments, with a chance to give free-text comments at the end. Through the survey, I sought to understand what ideas respondents associated with queer issues and representations in Japan and consider why those associations exist. The first section collected data regarding age, gender, target of sexual attraction and prefecture. For gender, alongside male and female, participants were given the option of ‘x-gender,’ ‘non-binary,’ and ‘other,’ the last of which they were allowed to write in an answer. Whether the respondent is transgender or not was not explicitly asked. While there are examples in English of questioning that seeks to establish the best way to ask about trans identity (for examples, see Guyan, 2022, chap. 4), such research is yet to be performed in the Japanese context and it is outside of this thesis’ scope to test. For sexuality, I chose to ask specifically about sexual attraction, that is the sex or gender that a person is attracted (Guyan, 2022, p. 76), rather than their sexual identity. As has been noted in previous studies, such an approach can more than double the number of people who indicate sexual attraction that is not purely heterosexual (Geary *et al.*, 2018; Guyan, 2022, p. 76). My approach thus sought to be inclusive by not tying a respondent’s understanding of whether they are (or want to identify as) LGBTQ+ to how they answered the question on sexual attraction.

The second section asked for the formats of media they consume, what streaming and social platforms they use and what genres they prefer. These questions were adjusted

based on the results of the pilot survey, with additional options added based on common free text inputs. The aim was to understand what forms of media are commonly consumed, and if this either influences, or certain opinions are more prevalent amongst, certain forms of media. Additionally, this allows for some comparisons and contrasts to be drawn between the results of my survey and a recent survey focused on Boys Love (BL) media performed by Satō and Ishida (2022), which featured similar questions regarding types of media being consumed. Finally, the choices also reflected themes that would emerge in later chapters. For example, chapter seven discusses streaming platforms connected to commercial broadcaster TV Asahi, and the survey collected data on which streaming platforms participants commonly used and how much television they watched daily.

Alongside questions on media consumption habits, respondents were also asked to identify their recognition of certain key terms both in queer media fandom and politics/sexual and gender minority movements. They were also asked their opinion on four topics regarding sexuality and gender: same-sex marriage, self-identification laws for transgender individuals, the teaching of sexuality and gender during compulsory education and their opinion on sexual and gender minorities appearing in children's media. Each of these touch on either a key topic surrounding sexuality or gender in society amidst the LGBT Boom or a broader issue that exists within the Japanese media surrounding sexuality and gender. The opinions of my respondents, when combined with responses to other measures in the survey, were revealing of what they associated with queerness in the Japanese media and how these associations differed depending by topic.

Same-sex marriage has been a key topic throughout the LGBT Boom, with significant pressure groups and ongoing litigation in district courts around Japan (*Shūkan tōyō keizai*, 2012a; Marriage for All Japan, 2024; Taniguchi, 2024, p. 63). As a central topic within the LGBT Boom, by asking my respondents their opinions on its legalisation this question gauged how they responded to socio-political issues surrounding sexuality. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, transgender issues became a major topic in the Japanese media in Summer 2023 amidst the debates over the LGBT *hōan* and the meaning of the term *seijinjin* - which opponents saw as enabling gender self-identification (Fujisawa, 2023; Fujisawa *et al.*, 2023; Nishio, 2023). In the year since, a court ruling in October 2023 led to the removal of surgical sterilization as a requirement for legally changing your gender and the largest opposition party in the Diet submitted a draft bill

that reduces the other requirements in June 2024 (Endō, Shioiri and Negishi, 2023; Rikkenminshutō, 2024). There was also been some discourse in talk show media over 2023 about gender self-identification laws, primarily in opposition to it (e.g., Abema Prime, 2023a). Drawing on the discourses surrounding self-identification and gender circulating in the summer of 2023, I asked people whether they agreed that transgender individuals should be able to determine their own gender and change it through a simple procedure. Through this question, I aimed to see what this revealed about attitudes towards transgender issues amongst my respondents.

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in education is a topic that has been raised across the past decade, though the LDP governments have largely resisted calls until now from education-focused media outlets, human rights organisations and academics to include education about sexual and gender minorities in the school curriculum (Knight, 2016; Watanabe, 2017, pp. 109–112; Nippon Kyōiku Shimbun, 2020; Kawasaka, 2024, p. 30). In the survey, I thus sought to gauge whether these calls for the inclusion of education about sexual and gender minorities were supported by my respondents. Finally, concerns regarding children being exposed to improper sexual behaviour has been a long-standing concern within the Japanese media sphere, the fear having been the catalyst the prosecution of pornographic manga targeted at adults in the early 2000s (Cather, 2012). Moreover, most prefectures have ordinances that can restrict access to certain media as ‘harmful’ to be seen as minors – in the 2010 these were directly used against Boys Love media (BL) in Osaka (Hori, 2015, 2020).<sup>13</sup> As is discussed in more detail in chapter five, fears surrounding queer imagery having a negative effect on minors also exist in fandom spaces for BL works online (e.g., dohatsu, 2021; okura, 2021). Through the inclusion of the question on representations of sexuality and gender for children, I sought to understand whether people felt sexual and gender minorities should be visible in media for younger audiences. Through these four topics, I aimed to look at how my respondents understood key issues surrounding queer rights and media representation, and what their responses revealed about the associations made with queerness in Japan.

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<sup>13</sup> These ordinances are generally known as either “Youth Protection Ordinances” (*seishōnen hogo kyōiku jōrei*) or “Ordinances to Protect the Healthy Upbringing of Youth” (*seishōnen kenzen ikusei jōrei*) (Cather, 2012, p. 81).

Finally, the survey moved onto ‘experiments’ regarding the potential effect of viewing or reading a media representation or discussion of non-normative sexuality or gender. Previous discussions have looked at the influence of American television shows such as *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) and *Ellen* (1994–1998) on support for LGBTQ+ rights after their high-profile depiction of gay and lesbian characters (e.g. Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Cooper, 2003; Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes, 2006). These studies indicate that representations of queerness can have positive effects on overall opinions of sexual and gender minorities. Such discussions have been picked up in explorations of representations in other, primarily American, television shows, with significantly less in other cultural contexts (e.g. Cavalcante, 2015). Satō and Ishida’s (2022) survey of BL/non-BL readers, is one of the few studies to look at the relationship between queer representation and viewers’ opinions in the Japanese context. However, their study involved asking BL readers and non-BL readers a shared set of questions regarding sexuality and gender rather than explicitly testing the effect of BL on opinions. In contrast, my survey focuses on what effect, if any, queer representations have on viewers’ opinions by directly showing them imagery or dialogue surrounding sexuality and gender. Through these tests, I then seek to understand the associations that drive people’s opinions on the topics being studied, and what this reveals about queerness in the Japanese media.

The tests discussed in this chapter focused on exploring respondents’ attitudes to two key issues surrounding sexuality and gender in Japan. First, a belief in an inherent ‘maleness’ (*otoko rashii kansei*) and ‘femaleness’ (*onna rashii kansei*) that may underlie surface-level gender expression or stated identity; and second, people’s opinions regarding the depiction of same-sex kisses at times that youth may see them. The former question is important to consider amidst backlash and debate surrounding gender that came into focus during and after the debate surrounding the LGBT *hōan* discussed so far. The second experiment discusses the intersection between kissing, queerness and its exposure to younger audiences. Kissing has played an important role in the Japanese popular media, ranging from a sexual act to a signifier of liberalisation and freedom (McLelland, 2012, p. 96; Abel, 2014, p. 203). Through looking at kissing in the media, we can consider what meanings people associate with the act and what this may suggest about attitudes towards representations of same-sex relationships. Drawing on the discourses that portray children as vulnerable to depictions of sexually suggestive

imagery mentioned in the previous paragraph, I asked about whether same-sex kisses should be broadcast at times children can see, who are often portrayed as uniquely (Cather, 2012, pp. 262–264; Tsaliki, 2015, pp. 504–505). These experiments highlight the effect that media representation can have on people’s opinions on queerness, and what attitudes may underpin my respondent’s answers.

In each experiment, there was a control group not shown anything, and depending on the question, anywhere from one to four treatment groups. The respondents were then asked a final question on one of the topics, the results of each treatment group were compared with the control groups’ responses through a t-test. At the end of the survey, there was also a chance for respondents to leave a longer comment with their thoughts on queer representation, which 1,131 respondents did. Taken together, this survey focuses on association – what participants identify with certain policies, terms and depictions that surround queerness in the media.

### **The Politics of Same-Sex Marriage and Gender Identity**

As the introduction of this chapter indicates, party politics has played a central role in media depictions of queerness and how sexuality and gender has been discussed in the wider media. Table 3.2 shows the breakdown of political party support in the survey, with independents the plurality. With the notable exception of the centre-left Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), who poll noticeably quite low, these results closely matched the results of equivalent voting intention polls taken between August and September 2023 (NHK, 2023; Senkyo dotto komu henshūbu, 2023; *Mainichi Shinbun*, 2023b). While the largest party in my results was the conservative LDP, followed by the centre-right JIP, this does not necessary mean that the bulk of the respondents were conservative or would define themselves as such.<sup>14</sup> An LDP voter is oftentimes attracted to their economic policies or local roots in a community rather than just their social policies (Nakamura and Hrebenar, 2015; Nakakita, 2020); the party is not only associated with support for conservative politics. The LDP is also not necessarily rigid in its conservative policy and instead is heavily driven by responding to what they perceive as popular at a given moment (Nakamura and Hrebenar, 2015, p. 139). The LGBT *hōan*, passed despite heavy

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the JIP is a national version of the party Initiatives from Osaka, a right-wing party in the prefecture. As one might expect, regardless of their actual political views, respondents in this survey from Osaka overwhelmingly supported the JIP.

opposition from the LDP's right-wing, may be seen as representative of this trend – moulding a policy in reaction to outside pressure, especially international events such as the Olympics and G7 conference, that breaks with core conservative beliefs (Nikaidō, 2021; Fujisawa, 2023). Support for conservative political parties in Japan does not necessarily lead to opposition to queer rights – something that is visible in the results of this survey.

**Table 3.2: Table showing Political Party Support Amongst Respondents**

<b>Party</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
Independent	45.00%	1315
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	26.00%	776
Japan Innovation Party (JIP)	11.00%	322
Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP)	6.00%	178
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	3.30%	96
Democratic Party for the People (DPP)	3.00%	89
Reiwa Shinsengumi (RS)	2.20%	66
Kōmeitō (KP)	2.00%	60
Party of Do it Yourself!! (DIY)	0.95%	28
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	0.41%	12
Other	0.37%	11

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 outline the support for same-sex marriage and gender self-identification by political party. The mean overall support for each measure is 50.6% and

46.9%.<sup>15</sup> For LDP voters, a plurality support both measures, though with higher opposition than parties like the CDP or independents. The only parties to show opposition on either measure are fringe far-right parties such as the DIY or the ‘other’ category, which was primarily supporters of the anti-NHK (the public broadcaster) party or the Conservative Party (*Nippon hoshutō*), which had yet to be formed. In general, support for both measures are coupled, though the support for self-identification laws is noticeably weaker amongst independents in my survey. Additionally, the number of respondents that were unsure on the self-identification policy I surveyed was higher for all parties when compared to same-sex marriage. As has been highlighted throughout this thesis so far, same-sex marriage is a policy that has featured as a central part of the LGBT Boom from the early 2010s (*Shūkan tōyō keizai*, 2012a; Khor and Kamano, 2021; Marriage for All Japan, 2024; Taniguchi, 2024, p. 63). As a result, in comparison to people’s opinions on same-sex marriage, there is more room potentially for people to have their views on any reforms to the law allowing people to change their legal gender changed. Such a possibility is notable in the wake of the anti-gender discourse that, as we saw in the introduction to this chapter in the opposition to *seijinjin*, has begun to emerge in Japan.

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<sup>15</sup> The SDP voters also showed opposition to both measures, likely a result of the very small sample size and age of the voters (56) sampled.



**Table 3.3: Percentage Support for Same-Sex Marriage by Party. Shaded Squares indicate the result was higher than the mean result for that column.**

Party	Support	Neither	Do not Support
No Party	52.1%	31.3%	16.7%
LDP	42.7%	29.1%	28.2%
JIP	50.8%	27.7%	21.5%
CDP	59.0%	21.3%	19.7%
JCP	63.5%	19.8%	16.6%
DPP	49.4%	19.1%	31.5%
RS	72.7%	10.6%	16.7%
KP	62.7%	23.7%	13.6%
DIY	25.0%	35.7%	39.3%
SDP	41.7%	8.33%	50.0%
Other	27.3%	18.2%	54.5%
Overall Mean	50.6%	28.2%	21.1%

**Table 3.4: Support for Gender Self-Identification by Political Party. Shaded Squares indicate the result was higher than the mean result for that column.**

Party	Support	Neither	Do not Support
No Party	44.6%	36.7%	18.7%
LDP	42.9%	32.0%	25.1%
JIP	53.1%	24.5%	22.4%
CDP	56.7%	25.3%	18.0%
JCP	58.3%	33.3%	8.33%
DPP	46.1%	25.8%	28.1%
RS	76.9%	13.8%	9.23%
KP	52.5%	35.6%	11.9%
DIY	22.2%	33.3%	44.4%
SDP	33.3%	25.0%	41.7%
Other	18.2%	27.3%	54.5%
Overall Mean	46.9%	32.4%	20.7%

Parties whose supporters strongly in favour of same-sex marriage or gender self-identification, the CDP, JCP and RS, also placed a higher rhetorical importance on LGBTQ+ rights. These parties have sought to associate themselves with a pro-LGBTQ+ image by pushing for greater rights for sexual and gender minorities in their rhetoric and legislative action. These three parties include same-sex marriage support as a key part of their policy outlines, and also typically ally with each other in elections (Rikkenminshutō, 2021; Nihon Kyōsantō, 2022; Reiwa Shinsengumi, no date). The CDP, JCP and RS also held to a united front on the LGBT *hōan* by supporting the use of *seijin* for gender identity (Matsuoka, 2023).<sup>16</sup> The position taken by these three parties ultimately lost out to the proposals from right-wing opposition parties. These three parties and their supporters may associate themselves with a pro-LGBTQ+ position but this has not translated into major legislative success in the National Diet.

By contrast, the conservative opposition, led by the JIP, have had more success in affecting changes to LGBTQ+ policies from the government. For example, the party's suggestions for the LGBT *hōan* included the term that was used in the final bill - *jendā aidentiti*. The JIP's media surrogates also contributed to alarmist rhetoric towards trans individuals during the debates around the LGBT *hōan*. One example of this can be found on Abema, a free ad-supported streaming television (FAST) service run by major commercial network TV Asahi and online advertisement company CyberAgent. Amongst the service's political offerings is the talk show *NewsBAR Hashimoto*, headlined by JIP member and former mayor of Osaka Hashimoto Tōru. In a March 2023 episode focused on the LGBT *hōan*, Hashimoto and his guest, Inada Tomomi, a member of the LDP who was the head of the committee that drafted the LGBT *hōan*, spend much of the episode talking about transgender issues ("Hashimoto Tōru x Inada Tomomi" LGBT *hōan* de rakugo undō!? Omoi to ha/tekigō shujutsu wa jinken shingai?', 2023). Hashimoto frequently brings up vague and unsourced claims about assaults by transgender women abroad, suggesting that these could happen in Japan. He further argues that there is a need to include the term "unfair" into the *hōan* because without it, the bill could be understood as preventing businesses and other groups from maintaining separated spaces based on

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<sup>16</sup> The LGBT *hōan* originated from a far stricter bill proposed by the predecessor party of the CDP - the Democratic Party (*Minshintō*) - in March 2016. The LDP refused support for this bill in favour of writing their own version: the LGBT *hōan* (Taniguchi, 2024, p. 64).

binary understandings of sexual difference ('"Hashimoto Tōru x Inada Tomomi" LGBT hōan de rakugo undō!? Omoi to ha/tekigō shujutsu wa jinken shingai?', 2023). Hashimoto's claims echo those discussed in the introduction of this chapter, that the LGBT *hōan* would make it difficult to enforce single-sex spaces as doing would be seen as discrimination under the bill. He associates people whose sex does not match the one they were assigned at birth, or do not fit preconceived notions of how a man or woman should visually present, with danger. Thus, the term "unfair" is necessary – without it single-sex spaces could not be maintained.

Hashimoto gave voice to misinformation surrounding the bill and unsourced claims about the harms of trans-inclusivity through his position both as the host of *Newsbar Hashimoto*, and as a representative of the JIP. As this example shows, gender-related policies leave a fertile ground for further litigation, reigniting the gender free debates of the early 2000s discussed in chapter one (see Yamaguchi, 2014). An association is formed in the media rhetoric of figures such as Hashimoto between trans-inclusive policy and danger - both to safety of single-sex spaces and the position of gender in Japanese society. Thus, as debates surrounding sexual and gender minority issues continue in the Japanese media, so too emerges an anti-trans rhetoric that is used to attack LGBTQ+ rights more broadly.

### **Anti-Trans Rhetoric**

Opposition to trans rights, and gender-based policies more broadly, were prominent in the free-text comments on the survey, mirroring the rhetoric we have seen until now in this chapter surrounding the LGBT *hōan*. The talking points echoed in the comments of my survey often recreated trans-exclusionary feminist talking points seeing the existence of trans women as a threat to women. Several of the comments specifically referenced toilets and the belief that sexual and gender minority rights, especially the latter, were a threat to the rights of women:

I oppose the expediated passage of the LGBT *hōan*. Actual women (*josei jishin*) will feel fear, palpitations and goosebumps from the loss of autonomy when a

sexual/gender minority woman (*sei teki mainoriti no josei*) gets close to them that is inexpressible in words. I wanted more debate [of the *hōan*].<sup>17</sup>

I feel that we can still see much prejudice. However, I cannot agree with the things being pushed by the government. As we should think separately about men and women, putting transgender people in there and saying to treat them the same (*mina onaji yō ni to iu*) is strange. The toilet issue in the LGBT *hōan* truly feels like awful discrimination against women.

In two of these three, explicit reference is additionally made to the LGBT *hōan* as having a “toilet issue,” an anti-trans talking point that argues that trans women using women’s toilets will lead to much higher incidents of sexual assault (Thurlow, 2023). This is not something that can be justified statistically; where gender self-identification laws have passed there has not been a corresponding uptick in sexual assaults in toilets nor is there evidence that there is a wider threat to women’s spaces from trans women (Hasenbush, Flores and Herman, 2019; Sharpe, 2020; Thurlow, 2024). Moreover, the LGBT *hōan* makes no reference to toilets and the largely symbolic nature of the bill means little to how toilets are structured. Yet these comments highlight that it does not matter that the reality of the bill did not match these hyperbolised statements of harm. Nor do the comments mention to the changes in the wording of the bill, which largely seemed to be a concession to concerns surrounding women’s spaces through only forbidding “unfair discrimination.” Trans people are associated in these comments with danger for women, treated as a minority that it is acceptable to fear, using the LGBT *hōan* as the justification for their beliefs.

At the same time these comments either make little claim about issues surrounding sexual minorities and, in some cases, contain affirmative comments on the rights of LGB people:

There’s a long culture of BL (Boys Love) from a long time back in Japan, so prejudices are surely just an extreme segment [of society]. However, from the

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<sup>17</sup> This person seems to have answered the survey twice, leaving a near identical comment a second time on the survey.

bottom of my heart I want unisex toilets to be stopped, and I also think it is strange to consider gender in sports, so I want that to be stopped in Japan.

This commenter ascribes homophobia to an “extreme segment,” pointing to the wide acceptance of BL as evidence of this. Yet, the commenter immediately shifts into opposition to unisex toilets and “gender” in sports – though it is not clear exactly what they oppose about the latter.<sup>18</sup> For many of my respondents, it was okay to express opposition to gender minority rights, or gender issues more widely, in a way that was not, or was no longer, appropriate to do for sexual minority rights. This points to a potentially ongoing shift, when coupled with the *NewsBAR Hashimoto* episode and the discourse seen online and in newspapers referenced until now (e.g., Iida and Sasaki, 2023; Yamaoka, 2023; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2023a), towards debates surrounding transgender rights playing a greater role in the LGBT Boom moving forward. The growth in opposition to trans rights is itself the result of two converging trends: one from outside of Japan as Euro-American, and especially Anglophone countries, have seen a rise in anti-trans sentiment and one native to Japan, born of the gender-free backlashes of the 2000s.

The first important trend is the rise in incendiary discourses surrounding transgender people over in recent years, spearheaded by a mixture of conservative parties and, especially in my home country of the UK, trans-exclusionary and gender critical feminists through the media (see Zanghellini, 2020; Thurlow, 2024; Butler, 2024). The above cited comments resonate with this perspective in their rhetorical construction of their transphobia as a concern for women’s rights. As Thurlow (2024, p. 6) notes, that trans-exclusionist feminists frame themselves as “pro-women” deflects from the fact their statements are “anti-trans,” a branding that seeks to portray themselves as “reasonable” people with concerns about women’s rights. The rhetoric of these feminists often involves gesturing to grandiose claims of harm to women that cannot be statistically backed-up but sound “reasonable” to anyone without pre-existing knowledge (Thurlow, 2024, p. 973). These trans-exclusionary discourses started to gain a foothold in Japan in the late 2010s, fuelled by women’s university Ochanomizu University announcing it would accept trans women applicants in 2018 (Shimizu, 2020, p. 98). In Japan, trans-exclusionist rhetoric

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<sup>18</sup> While at the time that this comment was made there was no specific event inflaming discourse surrounding trans athletes in the Japanese media, however there had been flare-ups of opposition on X/Twitter during the Tokyo Olympics (Lifu, 2024).

frames the rights of trans women as infringing those of cis women (Lifu, 2024, p. 131), mirroring the rhetoric seen in countries such as the UK. This move often erases trans men; no comments were left on my survey about trans men, although in recent years, UK media discourse has increasingly become inflamed by trans-exclusionary opposition to gender affirmative medical interventions for trans men, such as top surgery and hysterectomies, again from the position of ‘women’s rights.’ These comments point to a troubling undertone to current debates on LGBTQ+ issues in which the rights of gender minorities have become a core issue to be debated. This is not only something imported into Japan, but instead draws upon and repeats rhetoric that become prominent in the 2000s amidst the gender free backlashes. An association between transgender people and danger has appeared in parts of the Japanese media, framed through a mixture of discourses rooted in the gender-free backlash and trans exclusionary and gender critical feminism.

The connection between the gender-free backlash and the current anti-trans sentiment seen in parts of the Japanese media and society has been noted in recent scholarship (Shimizu, 2020; Lifu, 2024). These backlashes focused on various policies that sought to promote gender equality, fuelled by a belief that they would destroy what it meant to be male or female and lead to the “total erasure of cultural and biological differences between the sexes” (Yamaguchi, 2014, p. 559). The introduction of gender equality measures in Japan were treated as a foundational threat to the order of society – a fear also seen in the backlash to the LGBT *hōan*. Similar to the gender free backlash, anti-trans rhetoric has also been married with support for the LDP and conservative parties more generally (Yamaguchi, 2014, p. 563; Lifu, 2024, p. 131; Würrer, 2024). Opposition to trans rights may then evolve into broader opposition to queer rights in general, including same-sex marriage, evoking the homophobia also present in the gender free backlash (Yamaguchi, 2014, p. 559; Lifu, 2024, p. 131). The establishment of the Conservative Party of Japan in October 2023, a party that heavily draws on broad anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, is one reflection of this – a video introducing their policies on Abema’s talk show *Abema Prime* has over 2,000,000 views as of August 2024 (Abema Prime, 2023b).<sup>19</sup> The anti-trans sentiment seen in my comments is reflective of a revival

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<sup>19</sup> I go into more depth on the anti-trans rhetoric spread by Abema’s flagship talk show *Abema Prime* in chapter seven.

of the gender free backlash combining with trans exclusionary and gender critical thought. As a result, transgender issues, and gender issues more widely, become associated with danger and as an acceptable issue to comment on and use to criticise diversity more broadly.

The usage of transgender issues as a framing device for comments on queer rights more broadly was also visible when turning to the comments on my survey:

If we cater too much to transgender people, I think there will be a reversal and it will be difficult for other males and females to live. I don't intend to have prejudices towards transgender people, but it would be honestly awful to be a romantic target for a[nother] girl, or for someone who was male (*moto dansei*) to come into a public bath.

I think that Japan is backwards in its thinking towards transgender issues, but if my child brought home a lover of the same sex, I don't think I would be about to take it peacefully. It's a difficult issue.

In these examples, transgender issues are used to lead into their discomfort with same-sex attraction. The first comment, for example, is mostly about a belief that catering to trans rights will lead to an unspecified "reversal" on cisgender individuals, but also includes a comment expressing disgust at the possibility of being seen romantically by a member of the same sex.<sup>20</sup> The second comment is more positive on trans rights, only to express significant discomfort at the idea of their child being attracted to the same sex. This did not necessarily indicate opposition to same-sex marriage, but it suggests that a discomfort with same-sex attraction remains.

These comments highlight how associations are formulated surrounding sexuality and gender in the Japanese media. While there were numerous comments that objected to same-sex marriage, far more strongly visible was the anti-trans rhetoric that seeped through numerous comments. Trans issues are treated as far more open for debate and questioning than those surrounding sexuality. Even where the respondent's main issue is with sexuality, they often used their opinion of trans rights to frame and preface it. As has

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<sup>20</sup> The participant's answers on the survey indicated that they were supportive of same-sex marriage despite this.

been highlighted throughout this chapter, there is a growing association being formed in the media between trans people and danger and deviance, with opposition to trans rights then becoming a way to express discomfort with sexual and gender minority rights more broadly.

### **Media and Representing Queerness**

As was noted earlier with studies surrounding *Will & Grace*, an important factor in combating wider queerphobia is media representation of these groups. Such representations can seek to ‘normalise’ these groups for the public (Cavalcante, 2015, p. 455), or to facilitate understanding of them more broadly. The LGBT boom has seen a growth in texts depicting queer sexuality and gender in a variety of forms, from television shows to films and this has led to high recognition of terms surrounding sexual and gender minority lives. In the survey 89% of respondents were at least familiar with the term LGBT, for example. Moreover, likely an aftereffect of the then recent passage of the LGBT *hōan*, 65% of respondents had at least some familiarity with the term *seijinjin*. Amidst the present media environment, there is a significant level of understanding of the existence of sexual and gender minorities in Japanese society. However, high recognition of the existence sexual and gender minorities in society amongst my respondents did not necessarily lead to support for representations of them in the media itself.

One of the issues I measure in the survey was whether the participant felt that sexual and gender minority characters should be included in television shows aimed at children. Media texts can be a powerful tool to educate and shaping the attitudes of children towards issues surrounding sexuality, gender and cisheteronorms in society (Lester, 2014; Capuzza, 2020, pp. 324–325). In Japan, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the texts accessible to children are controlled through prefectural ordinances that designate certain texts as “harmful” (*yūgai*). The ordinance in Osaka was applied to several BL texts in 2010, leading to the removals of BL books from sale across the prefecture, for example (Cather, 2012, pp. 262–264; Hori, 2015, 2020). BL books at libraries have also been targeted out of fear of them being seen by children and presumably teaching them improper sexual morals (Hori, 2020). In more recent years, alarmist rhetoric has emerged in from conservative voices about the risks of children learning about LGBTQ+ lives (Katō, 2019; Yamaoka, 2023). One article in an online news site connected to the conservative *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper goes so far as to claim



that “comprehensive sex education” (including about LGBTQ+ lives) would destroy the very foundations of Japanese society (Yamaoka, 2023). How queer lives are depicted to children is an important topic that intersects with prefectural regulations and conservative backlash to queer visibility in Japan.

Depictions of sexual and gender minority characters in the Japanese media are not rare in practice. Turning to anime and manga targeted at a young teen audience, *shōnen*, examples of both same-sex attraction and/or gender non-conformity of various forms can be easily found in popular series. In the popular series *My Hero Academia* (2014–2024), there are two trans characters. *Gintama* (2003–2019), a comedy series discussed in more detail later in this chapter, features a character whose gender identity is ambiguous and shifts with the plot. In December 2022, at a convention of publisher Shūeisha that I attended, the voice actress for one of the characters in a new anime adaptation of a series known as *Dr. Stone* (2017–2022), made a particular note that she was not told the gender of the character she was playing. All these examples highlight that media aimed at younger audiences in Japan do depict queerness and do not hide it. In fact, as with *Dr. Stone*, it even seemed to be a selling point of the series.

Yet, despite the representations of queerness within these prominent anime and manga texts aimed at a young teen audience, the survey provided a largely ambivalent response to depicting sexual and gender minorities in media for children. When looked at across all respondents, a plurality of respondents answered that they neither oppose, nor support, doing so (44%), with slightly more (28.8%) opposed than supportive (27.7%). In practice, this means that the mean result skews slightly against showing sexual and gender minorities in children’s media, though by an extremely small margin. Thus, while there is a high recognition of sexual and gender minorities and terms surrounding them, there does not appear to be corresponding support for their depictions in media visible to children. Recognition of and support for certain policies does not necessarily translate to support for greater visibility for sexual and gender minorities, at least in media that is not targeted at adults.

Analysing the results of the question surrounding the depiction of sexual and gender minorities in the media further, we can look at how this may relate to the genres of media that they consume. Controlling for gender and age, table 3.5 shows the results of a regression analysis of support for representation, coded on a 1 (strong opposition) to

7 (strong support) scale, against the media genres watched by participants. Significant positive results were found for viewers of BL, Yuri and Dramas – all genres based on same-sex romance or that has seen a growth of such romances. Other significant results included sports, which as the next chapter will show has a close connection with queerness, and mystery. Exposure to queer representations seemed to make the respondent more likely to be open to them their depiction to younger audiences.

**Table 3.5: A multiple regression analysis analysing how opinions on sexual/gender minority representation in children’s media are affected by the genres of media watched by respondents.**

Coefficient	Estimate	p	Significance
Intercept	4.036	0.000	***
Genre: Comedy	0.029	0.568	
Genre: Sports	0.127	0.009	**
Genre: Romance	0.119	0.058	
Genre: BL	0.346	0.004	**
Genre: Yuri	0.310	0.044	*
Genre: Drama	0.148	0.003	**
Genre: History	-0.069	0.174	
Genre: Mystery	0.126	0.019	*
Genre: Horror	-0.038	0.597	
Genre: Fantasy	-0.050	0.414	
Genre: Action	-0.094	0.094	
Genre: Slice of Life	-0.069	0.178	
Female	0.227	0.000	***
Age	-0.007	0.000	***
Dependent Variable: Support for representing sexual and gender minorities in children’s media.			
Observations: 2901			
Multiple R <sup>2</sup> : 0.045			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> : 0.041			
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001			

While it is perhaps not a surprise that BL and Yuri consumers had positive reactions, it does suggest that consumers of queer media are likelier to be supportive of younger audiences seeing representations of sexual and gender minorities. These results are in-line with findings by Satō and Ishida (2022), who also found BL readers to have more positive views on issues such as same-sex marriage and less strongly held beliefs on gender roles. Greater support amongst BL fans for queer representation is not a given – in Zhang’s (2016) study of Chinese BL fans she found significant homophobic attitudes amongst them. Moreover, as the *yaoi ronsō* briefly discussed in chapter one indicates, there have been conflicts over the relationship between BL and gay communities (Lunsing, 2006; Vincent, 2007; Ishida, 2015). Alongside BL and Yuri, drama was another genre with a positive effect on views on representations of sexual and gender minorities to children. There has been a growth of live-action BL dramas that depict male-male romances since 2018, reflected in the success of works such as *Ossans’ Love* (2018), which I discuss in more detail in chapter seven (Wakamatsu, 2023). The main genres to show a positive effect are those that are connected with depictions of queerness – BL, Yuri and drama. Queer representation can affect the views of respondents and, as we will see in the experiments below, the associations people make about issues surrounding sexuality and gender in the media.

## **Experiments**

Representing queerness in a way that shifts the views of the wider audience is not as simple as just including characters of a certain sexual orientation or gender identity, however. To highlight this, I turn to the experiments performed in this survey that looked at how the participants approached depictions of queerness, and what affect they had on people’s opinions. These experiments, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, provided examples of a same-sex kiss, a brief scene from a representative text to test how people identified queerness, and a discussion of gender taken from the anime adaptation of *Gintama* (2006–2018). Each of the treatment groups were also asked the respondents between one and three additional questions about the text or image they were shown. Then, all respondents, including a control group who were not shown any stimulus, were asked a final question. In this chapter I will focus on two of the experiments performed. As explained in chapter two one of the tests had results that suggested a weak connection between the question and the text shown. Here, I will focus on the following two

hypotheses, looking to see if there is a significant connection between seeing representation and holding more supportive opinions towards same-sex and non-normative gender representation:

H<sub>1</sub> – Depictions and discussion of gender minorities will lead to the participant having a less strong view of ingrained gendered characteristics.

H<sub>2</sub> – Being shown depictions of same-sex kisses will lead to more positive attitudes towards their depiction in the media.

### **Gender and *Gintama***

To explore attitudes to gender in the Japanese media, I made use of a scene from the anime adaptation of *Gintama*, a popular manga that was serialised in the major young teen magazine, *Weekly Shōnen Jump* (*Shūkan shōnen janpu*) between 2003 and 2019. The manga has, as of 2024, sold over 73,000,000 volumes worldwide and the 2021 film that concluded the anime grossed 1,900,000,000 yen in Japan – the 18<sup>th</sup> highest take for a domestically-made film that year (Nihon eiga seisakusha renmei, 2022; Bandai-Namco Pictures, 2024). Frequently featuring political lampoons and satire of politics, *Gintama* is relatively direct in its presentation of the author's opinions and, as a manga published in a major teen-oriented magazine, is designed to be understood by both a broad, and younger audience. I also have significant familiarity with the series, having followed it while it was serialised. The selection of *Gintama* was based on it being a series that is both popular, often explores issues in contemporary Japanese society and that I had experience with it. Moreover, having started serialisation in the early 2000s, *Gintama* was created amidst the *one-kyara* boom discussed in chapter one (Maree, 2020), and correspondingly the manga features a group of cross-dressing gay men as one of the three main power blocs in the area of Tokyo the characters live. Alongside this, *Gintama* frequently lampoons gender-roles as a part of its comedy, male characters expressing a desire for a more conservative understanding of femininity are often met with mockery or results in the character in question being beaten-up (Jones, 2013). More broadly, the series repeatedly provides commentary on gender role through the character of Yagyū Kyūbei, culminating in the story arc that the extract used in this test was drawn from.

Assigned female at birth, but raised male, Kyūbei is a character that reflects the inconsistencies of gendered roles and how they relate to biology. Throughout the series,

they are frequently conflicted by their upbringing, their romantic attraction to the sister of one of the main characters, and their physical body.<sup>21</sup> They provide a representation of a character who can be broadly described as neither male nor female. Their conflicts culminates in the *Deko-bokko* story arc where all the male characters are turned female and vice-versa after Kyūbei accepts an offer from a mysterious fortune teller to change their physical body to male to win over their crush.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the arc, Kyūbei chooses to return to their original body (in doing so allowing the rest of their friends to as well), with the final scene extracted for use in the survey:

Kyūbei: I'm not manly. Nor am I girly. I'm just a foul lowlife...scumbag. After plenty of worrying about that is the answer I came to. Therefore, there is no need to do my fortune [again].

Gintoki: You will not necessarily come to the same answer twice. It may lead you to an even more confusing path but, here is one more ticket. Unfortunately, it is not something you can use for your date [with your crush]. It is a ticket that will take you to the next target of the Deko-Bokko Church. I will ask you one more time: will you take that ticket [to your date] and stay as a boy? Or will you take this ticket and return to your female body?

Kyūbei: Wh-who are you?

Gintoki: No matter which you chose, you will surely continue to be lost. But is that not okay? **Are you really aiming for maleness or femaleness, values created by someone else?** If it could be that easily solved, **then men, women, you...me...everyone would not have to struggle so much** ('10-1 =', 2015, emphasis in survey).

The above scene sums the core commentary of the arc, and what *Gintama* arguably suggests about gender as a whole: gender and the roles associated with it is an unachievable ideal created by “someone else” that everyone struggles to, and frequently

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<sup>21</sup> I have chosen to render Kyūbei's pronouns as they/them. Later chapters focus on them coming to think positively about being born a woman, though this does not seem to be inconsistent with their otherwise non-gendered presentation of themselves (see Sorachi, 2003-2019, chaps. 620, 684).

<sup>22</sup> *Deko-bokko* is a play on the kanji 凸凹, read *dekoboko*, which resemble the genitalia associated with male and female. The main villains of the story arc are called the *Deko-bokko* church and are a group that visit planets and alter the genders of the people there.

fails to live up to. There is little importance in focusing overly on this ideal and, above that, whether your body defines your gender or how you act, and should be seen, in society. Ultimately, Kyūbei concludes that they are neither male nor female, they are themselves, and no specific gendered identity can describe that. Even though they choose to return to their original body, Kyūbei finds their answer by looking beyond the binary offering provided to them by wider cisheteronormative society. More broadly, this describes the approach of *Gintama* to gender: there is no inherent and clearly definable maleness or femaleness embedded biologically. Thus, in the survey I sought to test how people understood this text in practice and how, if at all, their views on gender may be affected by it. By doing so I also sought to consider the associations participants make between media discussions of gender non-conformity and their pre-conceived understandings of gender.

For this section, participants were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: “Generally, women have a feminine sensibility (*onna rashii kansei*) and men a male sensibility (*otoko rashii kansei*).” The results were coded onto a one (complete disagreement with the view) to seven (complete agreement with the view) scale, with four as the neutral position. Additionally, I also asked respondents shown the extract to indicate what gender they thought Kyūbei to be based on the text, to see what impression of the character they drew from this brief extract.

The results of the two-sample t-test is shown in Table 3.6, comparing the responses of the control group and the treatment group to the final question. The results showed no statistically significant difference between the two, the result even showed a slight increase in belief amongst those who read the extract, rejecting  $H_1$ . The belief in an inherent maleness or femaleness contrasts with the results of asking people about the gender of Kyūbei – a plurality suggested that they were male (38%), then neither male or female (36%) and then female (25%). There were also a small number of written responses, which often suggested that there was a difference between body and the “soul” (*kokoro*) of Kyūbei or that they were transgender. Despite the extract suggesting that should Kyūbei take the ticket they will “return” to having a female body, most respondents did not consider the original body of Kyūbei as determining their gender. At the same time, recognising a difference between their body and their gender did not

necessarily show any effect on people's overall views on gender; the assumption that there is some inherent maleness and femaleness remained firmly held by the respondents.

**Table 3.6: A two-sample t-test comparing the control group mean with the mean results for those shown an extract from *Gintama*.**

Extract	n	Mean	t	p	Significance
<i>Gintama</i>	1524	4.75	-1.32	0.19	
Control Mean: 4.69					
Dependent Variable: Agreement with the statement "Generally, women have a feminine sensibility and men a male sensibility"					
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001					

However, some differences were evident when separating respondents by the gender they selected Kyūbei to be based on the extract. Table 3.7 displays the results of a t-test comparing each answer to the mean for those shown the *Gintama* extract. A positive effect was seen amongst people who identified Kyūbei as neither male nor female. By contrast, those who perceived Kyūbei as having a binary gender showed either no significant difference in their view on the final statement (those who selected female) or agreed more strongly with it (those who selected male). These results suggest that for a depiction to affect a respondent's views on gender, the character needed to be clearly perceived being outside of the gender binary. If they were perceived as either male/female, the depiction did not lead respondents to change their view on the existence of a biologically inherent maleness and femaleness.

**Table 3.7: A two-sample t-test comparing the overall treatment group mean with the mean result depending on what respondents thought Kyūbei's gender was.**

Kyūbei's Gender	n	Mean	t	p	Significance
Male	532	4.98	-3.24	0.0012	**
Female	348	4.73	0.25	0.80	
Neither	500	4.58	2.41	0.016	*
Overall Mean for Treatment group: 4.75					
Dependent Variable: Agreement with the statement "Generally, women have a feminine sensibility and men a male sensibility"					
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001					

The results of this experiment also suggest a wider issue – the introduction of ambiguity surrounding a character's identity may dull the potential effect of queer representation or commentary on gender. The Japanese language may allow for characters to be referred to without gendered pronouns, however consumers will not necessarily understand characters as being neither male nor female regardless of authorial intent. With *Gintama*, Kyūbei's gender can be read in any of the three ways presented depending on how you understood the context. The scene, while providing commentary on gender, does not clearly and unambiguously state what Kyūbei's gender is at this stage and the viewer is left to interpret this themselves. As my results show, 64% of respondents identified Kyūbei as male or female and doing so is not clearly an incorrect reading of the extract provided. The meaning of the text can thus float between several interpretations without providing one clear and fixed reading of Kyūbei's gender identity. While ambiguity can allow readers to construct their own understanding of the character, the character's gender identity needed to be clearly established for it to influence the associations respondents made about gender. Kyūbei was not clearly associated with gender non-conformity for the respondents, so the effect of the extract on participant's views may have been more limited. The ambiguity seen in the extract regarding Kyūbei's identity is not, however, something isolated to the depiction of gender beyond male/female, but also plays a key role when looking at the other test on same-sex kisses.



## **Same-sex Kisses**

Kisses can represent a wide range of meaning, from an expression of sexual desire to even signifying the liberalisation of society in the name of democracy and freedom (McLelland, 2012, p. 96; Abel, 2014, p. 203). The act of kissing straddles the line between being a public act that tells us something about societal conditions and what is more widely promoted in the media, and a private act between people, an expression of their own desires – how this is policed reflects the line drawn between these public and private meanings (Abel, 2014, p. 211). In the 1920s in Japan, for example, various forms of media sought to make use of the kiss in advertising, as a salacious plot-point in popular fiction and in non-fictional writing (Abel, 2014). In reaction, authorities sought to censor or prohibit depictions they saw as too much, whether by requesting scenes be cut from films, images of kisses be blocked out or redact descriptions of the act (Abel, 2014). By censoring these kisses, the regulators introduced ambiguity to these texts – audiences were left to guess at what was behind the redactions and censor marks and potentially create their own, even more risqué readings (Abel, 2014, p. 215). While the government may have sought to control the image of the kiss and what was associated with it, the act of censorship invited audiences to read into what had been removed and create their own imaginaries surrounding the kiss.

In the post-war period and American occupation, the meaning of the kiss shifted again, with the act promoted as a symbol of democratisation – something that was now given prominence in filmic genres rather than censored (McLelland, 2012, pp. 100-102). This newfound prominence brought with it debates surrounding the mediums in which the kiss was appropriate to show. For some direct depictions of kissing was a way of desexualising the kiss and preventing societal issues, while opponents to depicting kissing directly saw filmic depictions as profiting off what they saw as the ignorant masses who would underestimate the act's erotic nature (McLelland, 2012, pp. 111-113). At the core of these debates were both issues of medium – the appropriateness of kissing in filmic media - and the influence of explicit depictions of kissing on people's sexual knowledge. Such attitudes towards kissing remained evident in my survey – some free-text comments left sought to specifically explain that their opposition to kissing was not a matter of the participants being of the same-sex, but to the act itself being depicted. Both opposition and support for direct representations of kissing were concerned with what they could

teach people about sexual relationships and whether such knowledge was proper or should be normalised outside of the private realm.

The above history primarily describes the treatment of kissing in the media in general - presumed heterosexual in nature. Interest in same-sex relations, or homosexuality (*dōseiai*), and kissing also have occurred in similar periods – the 1920s and the post-war period, playing out in popular fiction, magazines and sexological articles (Pflugfelder, 1999; McLelland, 2012). However, same-sex relations were, above simply kissing, increasingly regulated over the course of the late 19th century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, reinscribed as a form of unnatural sexuality performed by ‘perverts’ (*hentai*) (Pflugfelder, 1999). Homosexuality was a form of sexuality more excessive than that of the kiss, a ‘perversion’ that not only to be regulated, but to be studied and ‘understood.’ Same sex kissing thus sits at the intersection of discourses surrounding the ‘perversion’ of homosexuality, the eroticism of the kiss and the potential of the act to symbolise progress and democratisation. By looking at attitudes towards same-sex kisses, we can understand more broadly how people approach queerness in the media in a form that has a long association in the Japanese media with eroticism and the representation of proper sexuality. In short, the kiss may stand either as a sign of progress or positive attitudes to sexual and gender minority representation, or a perception of moral degradation and excessive sexuality. Thus, this experiment sought to look at what participants associated with same-sex kisses and how this influences their views on queer representation.

Participants outside of the control group were shown one of four potential images/GIFs and asked questions about it. These were taken from the television anime *Yuri!!! On Ice* (2016), the movie *Adolescence of Utena* (1999) and the live-action drama *Ossan's Love* (2018–2024), all shows/movies with prominent queer storylines (Figures 3.1-3.3). Aside from their queer storylines, these texts were also chosen in reflection of their relative success and my own familiarity. *Yuri!!! On Ice* was a major success when it aired in 2016 – on Twitter it had 400% more tweets than the next most popular anime airing (Morimoto, 2019, p. 137). Additionally, it is a series that I have significant familiarity with from my own experiences in online fandom, including writing a report on social media posts about the series when it was airing. *Adolescence of Utena* was selected for its influence within both the anime sphere and academia. The *Utena* series, which *Adolescence of Utena* is a part of, has been heavily discussed in the context of

queerness and its influence on Yuri as a genre broadly in previous scholarship (e.g., Kotani, 2006; Lezubski, 2014; Cornejo, 2021; Friedman, 2022). The influence of *Utena* can also be seen in other places in the anime sphere – in the conclusion of this thesis I will briefly discuss *Gundam: The Witch From Mercury* (2022-2023), a successful instalment of the long-running *Gundam* franchise that draws heavy inspiration from *Utena*. Finally, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter seven, *Ossan's Love* was a major success for private broadcaster TV Asahi. The first season in 2018 achieved a high for its timeslot 5.7% audience share by its final episode – which is where the kiss pictured occurs – and the highest DVD sales for the station at the time (Oricon, 2018; TV Asahi, 2020). Its follow-up movie in 2019 was also the 12<sup>th</sup> most successful Japanese film at the box-office that year – grossing 2.65 billion yen (Nihon eiga seisaku renmei, 2020). Moreover, having been in Japan when the series aired, I also saw firsthand how the series cut-through to audiences who would not normally read or watch BL – such as my host family. These texts each represent one reasonably prominent or influential example of a same-sex kiss in the Japanese media – making them useful for testing attitudes towards the act.



Figure 3.1: The scene used from Yuri!!! on Ice episode seven. This was presented either as a still and a GIF depending on the group a respondent was sorted into. Source: ('Guranpurishirīzu kaimaku! Yacchaina Chūgoku taikai! Furī puroguramu', 2016, 20:53).



Figure 3.2: The scene used from *Adolescence of Utena* (1999, 01:20:17).



Figure 3.3: The scene used from the finale of *Ossan's Love*. Source: ('Happy Happy Wedding!?', 2018, 39:15).

After being shown the image or GIF, each participant was then asked three questions about the scene: what they saw, the rough age rating they would give it and the time of day they thought such a scene would be broadcast – each of these being multi-choice. The kiss scene from *Yuri!!! On Ice* was additionally presented to two different groups in different formats: one in the form of a still image and the other as a GIF. This reflects in the potential ambiguity of the kiss. In the pilot survey, where only the still image was presented, a plurality saw it as just a hug; including the GIF tests whether this result was because of the still image used or inherent to the way the scene depicts the kiss. All participants were then asked a final question – “Do you think that it is okay to directly depict (broadcast) kiss scenes between two men or women in anime, dramas etc. shown at a time that children may also be watching?” The response to this was then coded onto a 1 (agreement) to 5 (disagreement) scale.

The survey suggested that different responses to each of the images was connected to the associations made by the participants about each of the same-sex kisses. This is visible when looking at the responses to the final question. For all respondents, the breakdown of support showed an even balance between people supportive of (35.7%) and opposed to (40.46%) same-sex kisses being shown at times visible to children. However, differences start to emerge as each treatment group are separated out.

Table 3.8 shows the result of four two-sample t-tests comparing each treatment group with the mean for the control group. As can be seen, the difference between the control group and the means for both groups shown Figure 3.1 and its GIF equivalent shows a difference with a high degree of significance. Those shown imagery from *Yuri!!! On Ice* skewed slightly more towards support of showing same-sex kisses at times for children than the control. The same effect is, to a lesser extent, present and significant for those shown figure 3.2. The only result that was not significant was the result for the live-action male-male kiss from *Ossans' Love* in figure 3.3, which also had the lowest overall mean. This indicates that same-sex kisses, specifically in anime formats, seems to affirm H<sub>2</sub>, having a significant effect on people's opinions towards them being depicted in broadcasts visible to children. However, it is notable that *Ossans' Love*, the only live action show tested, had limited effect and, if anything, showed greater opposition. Moreover, the strongest result came from the most ambiguous image – the still one from *Yuri!!! On Ice* (Figure 3.1). If the imagery is not 'real,' then the kisses seem to be seen as acceptable to show to younger audiences.

**Table 3.8: A two-sample t-test comparing the control group mean with the mean results for each treatment group for the experiment on same-sex kisses.**

Test	n	Mean	t	p	Signif.
<i>Yuri!!! On Ice</i> (still image)	623	2.90	4.13	0.000039	***
<i>Yuri!!! On Ice</i> (GIF)	599	2.95	2.52	0.00057	***
<i>Adolescence of Utena</i>	600	3.02	-1.13	0.011	*
<i>Ossans' Love</i>	607	3.21	3.45	0.26	
Control Mean: 3.18					
Dependent Variable: Opinion on whether same-sex kisses are okay to broadcast at times they may be seen by children.					
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001					

Looking in more depth at how people responded to each of these images further highlights the association between whether a text was 2D or live-action and the scene being seen as more acceptable to be broadcast at earlier times and be appropriate for younger audiences. For example, *Ossans' Love* had the highest percentage of respondents who would expect the show was aired during the midnight block, i.e. past 12am, (66.5% of respondents), well past the peak period of viewing in Japan which stands at 7pm-10pm (Yoshimi, 2014). Moreover, the participants shown *Ossans' Love* had the highest number of respondents (36%) who would rate it as being appropriate only for audiences aged 18+. *Adolescence of Utena* and the still image and GIF of *Yuri!!! On Ice* all had lower percentages suggesting show should only be appropriate for audiences 18+ (23.04%, 11.08% and 19.6% respectively). *Adolescence of Utena* is equally as clearly a kiss in the image that is being shown, yet there is a 13% difference in the number who saw the work as being for audiences 18+. The main difference that *Ossans' Love* has with these other images is that it is live action. The result of this experiment suggests that there was a difference in the level of sexuality associated with images featuring real people and those that are two dimensional. The former corresponds in these results to weaker support for showing same-sex kisses to children and a greater assumption that the work would be aired late at night and be appropriate only for older audiences.

Moreover, a difference between the four images can be seen based on how ambiguous the kiss was seen to be. *Ossans' Love* had the highest percentage that identified the scene correctly as a male-male same-sex kiss at 93.83%; the next highest is *Adolescence of Utena* as a female-female kiss at 67.45%.<sup>23</sup> The scene from *Yuri!!! On Ice* is the most ambiguous: a majority of respondents on the still image saw it as a male-male hug (51.04%). Only 6.42% of respondents identified it as a male-male kiss. Even for the GIF of the scene, the results are not overwhelmingly conclusive, a plurality saw it as a male-male kiss (44.65%), only a small amount more than saw it as a male-female kiss (37.89%). While a more in-depth discussion of this scene in *Yuri!!! On Ice* will follow in chapter seven, the scene does not show the characters lips touching so can still be seen as just a hug – the scene is ambiguous in how it supports multiple readings and moves between them depending on how it is presented. Yet, the overall results suggested *Yuri!!! On Ice* to have the strongest positive effect, and particularly from the still image. Arguably, the positive effect of the image is in the ambiguity of the scene. The scene can be associated with both a homosocial reading, an embrace between two men, and a queer reading, as an explicit same-sex kiss.

This test suggests that where an image is both live-action and explicit, the effect on the participants' views on same-sex kissing is minimal to none. Where the image is direct, but not real, there is a positive effect. In the one instance where the image is not even seen as a kiss, the effect is even stronger, the participant potentially seeing it as so subtle and ambiguous to be clearly appropriate to show. What associations that respondents made with these images, and how these associations affected the viewer is primarily connected to how real they are, and whether they are explicit or not. There is seemingly a preference for ambiguity in queer depictions shown by the respondents from this survey – something that will be picked up upon again in the next chapter on Kyoto Animation.

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the role of association and the depiction of sexuality and gender in the Japanese media sphere and society more broadly. Through the lens of

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<sup>23</sup> The difference between these percentages can be partially explained by the 23% of respondents who misidentified the kiss from *Adolescence of Utena* as being a man and a woman. This high percentage may reflect the relative lack of clearly gendered features on the characters in the image shown.

association, we can see what meanings my respondents linked with issues surrounding and depictions of queerness in society. Despite broad support for sexual and gender minority rights, there is still a reticence to seeing things that may be clearly identifiable as queer in the media, especially when viewable to younger audiences. At the centre of this is the conflicts over what queerness, and specific forms of it, are associated with in society. In this chapter, I primarily looked at association in the context of sexual and gender minority rights, and especially transgender rights, and media depictions of queerness and how they influence the opinions of viewers.

Throughout the first half of this chapter, we saw how debates over the LGBT *hoan* galvanised anti-trans rhetoric in the media that associated trans people with a threat to single-sex spaces and the overall order of society. These anti-trans talking points were then repeated by commenters on my survey. The rhetoric seen in the media when considered alongside the free-text comments on my survey suggested a fusion of the beliefs that drove the gender-free backlash and the talking points often found in trans-exclusionary feminist discourse propagated in the Anglospheric media. These anti-trans, and anti-gender, beliefs have culminated in the creation of anti-LGBTQ+ groups and parties such as the Conservative Party of Japan, which together point to a possible trend on the right: opposition to LGBTQ+ rights galvanising conservative support.<sup>24</sup> At the core of this is an association made with transgender rights, and gender policy more broadly, being acceptable to attack or use as a vector for attacking queer rights.

Similarly, while there is a wide recognition of sexual and gender minorities in Japanese society, this does not correspond with wide support for showing depictions of them in shows that may be visible for all-ages. This is closely connected into what is associated with sexual and gender minority representation. When looking at *Gintama*, there was no clear positive effect from representation looking at all respondents, even as a significant number of respondents identified Kyūbei as neither male nor female. On a more detailed look however, those who did see Kyūbei as neither male nor female had less strongly held views on gender. As the test on kissing suggests, a distinction can be

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<sup>24</sup> In a by-election for a Tokyo-based seat in the National Diet in April 2024 the Conservative Party candidate received 14% of the vote, coming in fourth. While there was no LDP candidate, this result does suggest the party may have some potential draw to conservative voters, and their candidate placed ahead of the one supported by both the DPP and the *Tomin fāsuto no kai* - the party associated with the governor of Tokyo.



made between 2D/3D representations and directness. 2D representations correlated with more positive responses to depicting same-sex kisses in shows that minor could see. This positive effect was also more prominent when the kiss was not completely unambiguous, as in *Yuri!!! On Ice*. In both instances, ambiguity was important in how it affected and shaped the way that queer representation was understood and how it may have influenced the views of participants on issues surrounding sexuality and gender. In ambiguous texts, there is no fixed final meaning and what is signified can float between possibilities depending on how the text is encountered and the consumer's own frameworks of knowledge. Ambiguity is important from the perspective of association – a singular text can be associated with multiple potential readings and can appeal to a wider audience.

This survey can only capture an immediate reaction, a longer-term study of consumers is needed to better ascertain the effect of sexual and gender minority representation on respondents. However, these results point to a broader focus on ambiguity that is prominent in queer representation in Japan. Whether it is more positive responses to less explicit depictions of same-sex kisses, or respondents broadly supporting queer rights but being less supportive sexual and gender minorities being depicted, there is a preference for ambiguity. Even in the middle of an LGBT Boom, survey participants' apparent reticence towards the explicit depiction of queerness in the media persists. From my survey, it appears that ambiguity that allows for associations with things other than queerness are the more supported forms of 'queer' media representation. This ambiguity is also a feature of other aspects of the circuit of culture. In the next chapter, I will turn in the next chapter to the way that such ambiguous representations are constructed through a case study of how language relating to queerness is deployed in the texts of Kyoto Animation and in fan discourse surrounding them.

#### 4. Signification: Language and Kyoto Animation

In June 2019, the influential anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was re-released on streaming service Netflix, with new subtitles handled by the license holders of the franchise, series director Anno Hideaki's company Studio Khara. These subtitles differed in several ways from those on previous licensed translations produced by the now defunct ADV film. Particular attention was drawn on social media to the changes made to a scene in episode 24 (Morrissy, 2019). Over the course of the episode, Kaworu, the last of the beings attacking Earth (known as "angels"), becomes increasingly close with the main character, Shinji, with the two seemingly sharing a special and potentially romantic bond. A key scene in the pair's relationship is a conversation they have, which occurs halfway through the episode in the bathhouse in the facility where several of the characters work. Their exchange was initially translated in the new Netflix subtitles as follows:

Kaworu: You are worthy of my grace [*kōi ni atai suru yo*].

Shinji: Grace [*kōi*]?

Kaworu: It means I like you [*suki tte koto sa*] ('Saigo no shisha', 1996, 10:00).

Fans of the series expressed their discontent on Twitter over the decision to utilise the word "like," instead of "love" in the translation of the final line, as had been the case in the previous ADV version, labelling it a form of ambiguity that enabled queer erasure (Morrissy, 2019; Romano, 2019). For these fans, the language that was being utilised was important to their queer engagement with the work.

The above scene, both in this new English translation and the original Japanese places an emphasis on the ambiguity of Kaworu's feelings towards Shinji, and what his "like" (*suki*) means. The Netflix translator, an employee of the studio that owns the rights to the series, defended his translation by alluding to the ambiguity of what Kaworu meant by *suki*, arguing that "leaving room for interpretation make (sic) things exciting" (dankanemitsu, 2019). He also highlighted a translated excerpt of an interview in which the series' director Anno describes how he finds the appeal of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* to be in how "things are left ambiguous, so it all depends on how you view [and judge it for yourself]," something that makes it "very Japanese" (Anno, 1997 quoted in Morrissy, 2019). This sentiment was echoed by Shinji's Japanese voice actor, Ogata Megumi, who tweeted that she felt 'like' to be a closer translation, comparing the ambiguity of the scene

to an explicit same-sex couple in the contemporaneous *Sailor Moon* anime (Megumi\_Ogata, 2019). These official sources placed importance on how the meaning of the word “like” is not fixed – it is ambiguous as the meaning of the word floats between multiple possible readings. Yet for fans this ambiguity was unnecessary, with one fan’s Twitter rebuttal of the translator garnering more likes than his original explanatory tweet. In the aftermath of this, one minor change was made to the subs on Netflix, with “grace” changing to “affection.” The word “like” remains the translation at the time of writing.

Going behind the translation controversy itself brings out a wider question around word choice, language and queerness – why was the word *suki* chosen over more explicit words that largely lack the same ambiguity, such as *ai* or *koi*, which are almost always used to express romantic love (Shibamoto-Smith, 1999, p. 132; Saeki, 2010, pp. 94–95; Long, 2024)? This entire episode is roughly edited, switching from scene to scene at a rapid pace with few transitions, Shinji and Kaworu’s interactions, however, are some of the only extended scenes. Throughout, Shinji is frequently blushing whenever he looks at Kaworu, who even declares at one point that he may have been “born to meet” Shinji. While queer subtexts are evident, the language stops short of anything that is explicitly romantic and *suki* helps maintain an ambiguity that means that it is never made fully clear whether what Kaworu and Shinji feel for each other is romantic love. The word *suki* means that the entire relationship remains ambiguous enough that readers can read it as explicitly romantic or more platonic.

The above example highlights how central the role of language is in making queerness explicit, both from the perspective of the translation that sparked debate amongst fans, and the original Japanese language usage itself. The choice to use *suki* over other words stands out for its relative vagueness, even as it contrasts to the seemingly more explicit visual imagery of the episode that may support a more clearly romantic reading. Both a queer and homosocial reading are possible, and the language used in the scene does not privilege one over the other – it is left for the viewer to decide.

*Neon Genesis Evangelion*’s translation controversy is an illustrative example of the fraught relationship between language and queerness in the Japanese media, and in wider engagements with these media texts. To highlight this, this chapter focuses on an extended case study of major anime studio Kyoto Animation and their multimedia franchises *Free!* (2013–2018) and *Sound! Euphonium* (2015–2024, *Hibike! yūfoniamu*).

Both texts have proven major successes for Kyoto Animation. The finale of *Free!* was released as a film and has grossed over 1,000,000,000 yen at the box office until now (iwatobi\_sc, 2023). A short, animated special released theatrically for *Sound! Euphonium* in 2023 ahead of the third season airing in Spring 2024 also proved successful – grossing over 450,000,000 yen (anime\_eupho, 2023). These series focus on casts of primarily a single sex: male and female respectively and, at least initially, focus on similar settings of a school club aiming to qualify for the national championships in their respective area. Finally, while both series lack any explicitly queer couples, the language utilised throughout the media they appear in repeatedly tease and point to queer possibilities within the works themselves, in many cases blatantly. This chapter will primarily focus on the texts themselves, specifically their anime, alongside the way the series and scenes within are represented in published interviews with creatives, fan discourse and marketing.

I analyse the texts of Kyoto Animation through the signification process of the Circuit of Culture. In my modified version of the Circuit of Culture used in this thesis, signification replaces representation. As noted in chapter one, representation in the Circuit of Culture model is a process that describes the generation of meaning through the connection of concepts with language (Hall, 1997b, p. 17). To describe this process, Hall (1997b) draws heavily on a semiotic approach to understanding meaning in society, looking at the connection between signs (the signified) and concepts (the signifier). How we then connect concepts and language is shaped by how knowledge is formed in society and how this connects into the circulation of power in society (Foucault, 1980, pp. 112–113; Hall, 1997b, p. 42). A single concept or text can hold multiple meanings shaped by the struggle between the contesting discourses that surround it; the connection between a concept and language is constantly shifting (Hall, 1982, p. 65; Storey, 2010, p. 9). I argue that this process can be looked at as a modified form of signification with a focus on how circulations of knowledge and power shape the link between the signifier and the signified. For example, in the above scene from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, underlying the debates as to what the language of the scene signified were the frameworks of knowledge informed the differing readings of the text by the translators, actors and consumers. These frameworks led to different understandings of the original text and how explicit any romantic subtext was in it. The process of signification highlights how and why meaning

is generated in these media texts and what these can reveal about queerness in the Japanese media.

Through analysing *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, this chapter discusses what signification reveals about the depiction of queerness in the Japanese media in the last fourteen years. I locate my analysis more within wider cultural discourses surrounding youth and sports in Japan and how these connect to wider issues of sexuality and gender in the media. The framing of language in both *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* reflects the interactions between the processes that construct queerness in culture as something that is constantly visible, but simultaneously able to be linguistically obscured. The language both passes within cisheteronormative codes to some consumers, while equally being clearly outwardly queer works to other consumers.

### **The Producers of Queerness: Kyoto Animation**

First established in 1985, Kyoto Animation primarily worked as subcontractors for other studios, only releasing their first in-house produced anime series in 2003 with *Full Metal Panic? Fumoffu*. They would garner wider attention after their anime adaptation of *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (*Suzumiya Haruhi no yūtsū*) in 2006, a major success and cultural phenomenon both in Japan and abroad. Unlike many other anime studios, Kyoto Animation produce almost all their works completely in-house, including merchandise which is only sold on their website or at stores that are licensed to sell their goods. They additionally have their own publishing label, KA Esuma bunko, which again primarily sells on the company online store and through a limited number of approved stores.<sup>25</sup> The studio has also seen significant troubles. An arson attack in 2019 on their first studio led to the death of 36 members of staff. This incident also must be considered as a background factor for both series under discussion in this chapter, as their final parts were produced against the background of the arson attack, Kyoto Animation's financial struggles afterwards and the disruption of COVID-19 from March 2020.

A central feature of Kyoto Animation's operation, and an important route through which they have obtained rights for works, is the Kyoto Animation Grand Prize. Awarded annually from 2008 to 2019, Kyoto Animation accepted submissions in several categories,

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<sup>25</sup> These approved stores do not, for example, include one of the largest bookstore chains in Japan, Kinokuniya.

with a prize award of up to one million yen (roughly GBP5,220) and in many cases, publication under KA Esuma Bunko and a fast-tracked anime adaptation. Since the introduction of the awards in 2009, the majority of the studio's output has been works commended in these awards or works published under their publishing label separately. In other words, much of what Kyoto Animation produces is internally controlled from first manuscript through to anime adaptation, merchandising and licensing. The studio's imprint as producer is undeniable, leading to shared characteristics in the language and character interactions in these texts. Consideration of these shared characteristics is thus important for analysing the signification of meaning in *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* and what these texts reveal about queer representation in the Japanese media.

### ***Free! and Sound! Euphonium***

*Free!* is closely connected to the Grand Prize. The series was originally submitted as an entry to the novel category of the Grand Prize in 2011 under the name *High Speed!* and published as two light novels, a form of easy-to-read popular fiction featuring manga-like illustrated pages, in 2013 and 2014 (Ōji, 2013, 2014). While not a Grand Prize winner, the series won a commendation (*shōreishō*) and quickly received an anime production, with a concept released by partner studio Animation Do in April 2012 and a 30-second commercial a year later in March (Loo, 2012; Kyoani Channel, 2018). The brief trailer alone proved popular enough, even outside Japan, that a sea of fanfiction and other fan works such as a dating simulator followed before the announcement of the full anime a month later.<sup>26</sup> Key elements driving this popularity were the shirtless, muscular male characters and their sexual appeal to viewers; the first season's themes being summed up by director Utsumi Hiroko (2014b, p. 23) as “swimming x the bonds between men (*kizuna*) x the upper body”. The few female characters simply serve to further this narrative drive, being obsessed with the upper bodies of the male characters, allowing for frequent shots of the toned bodies of the swimmers as the female characters admire them. The anime itself, while containing a loose adaptation of the first light novel in flashbacks, is a largely original story focused on an all-male high school swim club with their close,

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<sup>26</sup> While no longer playable, the original link for this dating simulator can be found here: (fifthdimensional, 2013).

frequently homoerotic, interactions with each other driving much of the drama in the series.

The series has had two directors. The first two seasons were directed by Utsumi Hiroko, who departed Animation Do around 2016 and would subsequently direct the adaptation of 1980s queer manga *Banana Fish* (2018) and sports anime *Sk8 the Infinity* (2021-present) - which is discussed in chapter seven. After her departure, all subsequent series and all but one of the films have been directed by Kawanami Eisaku in his first lead job. *Free!* was also the first Kyoto Animation series to have three seasons, a testament to its success. Overall, the series has three seasons, three recap movies summarising those seasons (*Free! Timeless Medley Kizuna*, 2017; *Free! Timeless Medley Yakusoku*, 2017; *Free! Road to the World Yume*, 2019), and four additional movies featuring original content (*Hai supīdo! Free! Starting Days*, 2015; *Free! Take Your Marks*, 2017; *Free! the Final Stroke zenhan*, 2021; *Free! the Final Stroke kōhan*, 2022). The series is considered to have concluded with the release of the final film in April 2022, but merchandising continues for the series including a 10-year anniversary event in 2023, albeit with no new anime in production at the time of writing.

By contrast, *Sound! Euphonium* is not based on a work submitted to the Grand Prize or published under the KA Esuma bunko label, being an original series first released as a series of novels written by Takeda Ayano and published by Takarajimasha between 2013 and 2019 that have sold over 2,000,000 copies to date (Takeda, 2013–2019; Takarajimasha, 2024).<sup>27</sup> The series also has received multiple spin-off novels and collections of short stories set in-universe, the most recent of which was published in June 2024 (Takeda, 2024). The novels, written by Takeda Ayano, were adapted into an anime by Kyoto Animation in 2015, with a second season airing a year later in 2016, both directed by Ishihara Tatsuya and Yamada Naoko.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, two recap films of the broadcast anime (*Hibike! Yūfoniamu: Kitauji kōkō suisōgakubu e yōkoso*, 2016; *Hibike! Yūfoniamu: Todoketai merodi*, 2017), and two further films, an original story titled *Liz*

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<sup>27</sup> *Sound! Euphonium* is sometimes listed as a light novel in English sources, including by the publisher of the translation of the first book, Yen Press, but it is not sold as such in Japan. Instead, the series is sold alongside regular fiction books in the small and cheap *bunko* format.

<sup>28</sup> While Yamada Naoko was credited with a slightly different role, the series production director (*shirīzu enshutsu*), in practice she and Ishihara Tatsuya were equal co-directors during these two seasons (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015, pp. 22–23).

and the *Blue Bird* (2017) and an adaptation of the second year in-series titled *Sound! Euphonium: The Movie – Our Promise: A Brand New Day* (2019) have been released. A short film known as an OVA (original video animation) was released in cinemas in Japan in July 2023 (*Hibike! Yūfoniāmu: Ansanburu kontesuto*, 2023), with the third and final anime season airing from April 2024. As noted, the series has an almost exclusively female cast, with the main recurring male character heavily side lined in the anime adaptation. Despite him being the intended love interest in the novels, the focus heavily shifts towards the intimate relationships between the female characters. Much like with *Free!*, Kyoto Animation's production places a far greater emphasis on same-sex intimacy between the characters. The highly suggestive language, along with the deemphasising of potential heterosexual couplings, then signifies the possible queerness of these intense relationships.

In each series, the focus is initially on a high school club aiming to reach national championships in their respective fields, for *Free!* this is swimming and in *Sound! Euphonium* it is concert band contests (*konkūru*). In each series the clubs have a storied history of success in the past but are now a shadow of their former selves after years of neglect and poor leadership. The main characters in the series group together, alongside a new leadership team at the club and the remaining talents who have been held back by both their own, and previous clubmates, apathy to launch a serious challenge to reach nationals. The series then follow a central character over the course of roughly three years. In *Sound! Euphonium*, this means the first through third year of high school, and in *Free!*, the second year of high school to the first year of university. In both *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, the series end with the characters overcoming a series of failures along the way to achieving their respective dreams, in the former making the Japan national team, and the latter a gold medal at national level. Just as importantly, the casts build extremely close relationships with each other in doing so.

The works are thus differentiated by how their authors write around these shared plot points, and the focus they place on different elements. *Free!* places a great emphasis on the relationships between the male characters. The collective aim is to reach the national finals in the first two seasons, and in the third season for the main character, Nanase Haruka (referred to as Haru in-series), to make the Japanese Olympic team. However, Haru's aims are often intertwined with his fractious relationships with former



teammates. Haru is additionally individually the most talented in his team, and as the series goes on, a contender for the Japanese Olympic team, meaning the series primarily focuses on an individual, unique talent who draws attention from all characters.

By contrast, *Sound Euphonium* features a smaller world, almost exclusively focused on the main character's school. The main character, Ōmae Kumiko, is a euphonium player in the brass section, but at the start of the series she is not shown to be exceptionally talented when compared to others. Instead, she is defined by her hard work in constantly improving until she takes leadership of the club in her final year, as well as by her close relationship with key talented individuals in her band. The exact nature of these relationships does, as will be explained in this chapter, vary greatly by the adaptation, with the novel and anime taking significantly different approaches. In short, *Sound! Euphonium* focuses on a more 'ordinary' individual in terms of talent who, despite that, can draw intimate attention from others in her circle. However, while both *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* may differ in the exact details; they generally follow a similar plot structure with a heavy focus on the intimate relationships with fellow team members and rivals along the way. Through analysing *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, this chapter draws on the signification process of the Circuit of Culture to highlight how the language of these texts simultaneously signifies both queer and homosocial readings.

### **Youth, Sports and *Bukatsu*: Contextualising *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium***

*Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* can be broadly defined by two key terms: youth (*seishun*) and sports. Kyoto Animation, both in interviews with the staff and in the works about the company often focus greatly on how they depict "youth" through their depiction of school clubs (*bukatsu*) and the bonds between characters within (Utsumi, 2014a; Utsumi, 2014b; Ishihara *et al.*, 2015; Nomura, 2016). Simultaneously, these works function as representatives of, and can be read almost entirely within, the sports genre. The connection between these two genres shapes the works of Kyoto Animation and is crucial to how the language within can be read as both homosocial and queer simultaneously. How a consumer understands youth and sports influences the frameworks of knowledge they use to read the language of *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* and what meanings they see being signified by these two texts. As is discussed below, these two genres do not have fixed meanings; how they shape the texts and what they signify is closely connected

to the ways they are constructed in contemporary media, which for this thesis is between 2010-2024.

Youth, or *seishun*, holds an important place in the Japanese media as a period of one's life prior to entering the workforce and becoming a member of society (*shakaijin*) by joining the workforce (Dasgupta, 2017). In her study of youth in Japanese *aidoru* (pop-star) music, Finan (2022, p. 65) argues that youth, focused on “discourses of adolescence as a timeless, spontaneous, struggle-oriented way of being, set around the Japanese school” forms an infinitely marketable cultural trope that is core to the Japanese media industry itself. This youth is also, as Uno (2015, p. 120) argues, heavily divided along gendered lines. When evoking images of youth, the focus is primarily on a single sex group. Their relationships then provide ample ground for queer readings – the almost entirely single-sexed nature of the casts providing a space to draw homoerotic subtext from. In *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, these intense homosocial/homoerotic bonds are represented through high school sports and the clubs that surround them.

Sports media, and its connections with youth, is closely connected to socioeconomic conditions and masculinity. One of the most popular subgenres of sports media, *supokon*, emerged in the 1960s and was defined by working class heroes and hard-work, guts and embedded coming-of-age narratives – a reflection of Japan rising from defeat and learning how to win again (Abe, 2011; Collins, 2012, p. 1737).<sup>29</sup> These narratives frequently centred youthfulness, with school-aged protagonist teams achieving incredible sporting feats through sheer hard work and effort. (Finan, 2022, p. 50). With Japan's increasingly booming economy however, sports, the role of youth within these sporting narratives continued to change. The 1980s saw a shift towards stories of world-class naturally talented athletes who were leaders, and the economic malaise since the 1990s a focus on community and acceptance that it may not always be possible to win (Collins, 2012, pp. 1737–1738; Barber, 2014, pp. 141, 144). Both *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* draw from the shifting genre, combining the hard work of the *supokon* narrative with the focus on building communities and bonds within their respective clubs. While victory is ultimately the aim in both, just as much importance is placed on the relationships formed between characters. Facilitating these relationships is the role of

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<sup>29</sup> *Supokon* is short for *supōtsu konjō*, literally meaning sporting guts.

*bukatsu* in the narratives, which serve as a representation of the peak of one's youth and the deep bonds formed within it.

*Bukatsu*, short for *bukatsudō* refers to extra-curricular clubs at Japanese schools that run the gamut of activities, though can be broadly divided into sports clubs and cultural clubs and are a popular theme in the Japanese media (Cave, 2004; Kobayashi, 2012; van Ommen, 2015). *Bukatsu* are relatively intense, with sports clubs often meeting up to six times a week, including practice on weekends and holidays (van Ommen, 2015, p. 86). While *bukatsu* will have an assigned member of staff (unpaid for their labour), they may not be specialised and in many cases the club's direction is led by the more senior students (Cave, 2004; van Ommen, 2015). In an ideal world, *bukatsu* serve to develop organisational abilities among students, to develop basic skills through often repetitive practices and instil a strong work ethic into participants that may aid them when they become *shakaijin* (Cave, 2004; Uchiumi, 2014; van Ommen, 2015). This is capped off by tournaments wherein schools are pitted against each other with the aim of making the national championships. Some, such as high school baseball's annual summer tournament at the oldest baseball stadium in Japan, the Kōshien, are amongst the most watched sports tournaments in Japan overall with attendance in the hundreds of thousands (Yamamura, 2017, p. 794). These tournaments are not exclusive to sports clubs, as in *Sound! Euphonium*, even cultural clubs such as concert performance have inter-school, Japan-wide tournaments facing schools off against each other. *Bukatsu* represent the peak of *seishun*, a space beyond exams and other pressures that is focused on building relationships and, through the struggles of practice, navigating hierarchy and inter-school competition to build character.

The combination of youth and sports against a *bukatsu* setting is central to the framing of *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, and how the language within can simultaneously signify both completely queer and homosocial readings. As mentioned at the start of this section, the texts of Kyoto Animation are often described as being about youth (e.g. Utsumi, 2014a; Ishihara *et al.*, 2015; Nomura, 2016). The focus on youth both draws attention to the intense relationships of the characters while also placing Kyoto Animation's works in a liminal, nostalgic phase before the characters real members of society and subject to the strict cisheteronormative expectations within (Roberson, 1995; Dasgupta, 2017, pp. 32–33). This youth is structured around sports, or *bukatsu*-derived

sports-like structures. Sports media carries a presumption of heterosexuality, even as queer readings are present or even acknowledged (Caudwell, 2009, pp. 260–261), and is closely connected to homosociality. As Sedgwick (2008, pp. 185–186, 2016, p. 1) argues, homosocial is a term that was formulated in reference to homosexuality, used to distinguish activities that facilitate close male bonding “not as homosexual, but as against the homosexual.” In doing so, the “continuum” between homosexuality and homosociality is obfuscated and rejected (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014, p. 4; Sedgwick, 2016, pp. 1–2). If sports is presumed homosocial then it rejects homosexual readings of the relationships within and, as we will see later in how consumers approach *Free!*, such queer readings may be open for mockery or treated as delusions in online conflicts over the signification of meaning in these texts. Sports and youth are frames that can provide a homosocial explanation for even the most blatantly queer of depictions. Queerness may be one plausible interpretation, but it is never the only possible reading.

### **Youthful Girls: Sisterhood in *Sound! Euphonium***

Appeals to the homosocial can thus effectively reject queer readings, or at the very least cover for them. Out of *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, this is most prominently seen in the latter through the depiction of a ‘sisterhood’ that is both explicitly queer and denies its legitimacy outside of a liminal period and place. In Japan, there is a long history of popular acceptance of same-sex intimacy between girls and young women, as a developmental stage associated with youth. This popular acceptance was especially visible in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when terms such as “S” were used to describe romances - typically schoolgirls with an age gap who had a crush on each other - with the S often standing for sister (Robertson, 1998, p. 68; Dollase, 2003, p. 743; Pflugfelder, 2005, p. 137). The letter S would also lend its name to a genre of fiction popular in the 1910s that focused on these close schoolgirl relationships that blurred the line between homosocial and homosexual (Friedman, 2022, p. 28). These S relationships arguably occurred in what King (2019b, 2023) - drawing on Honda Masuko (2009) - refers to as a “*shōjo* (lit. girlhood) space,” a liminal space in which the *shōjo* (lit. girl) can develop their girlhood and enjoy “frivolous” fantasies protected from the norms and expectations of society.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Shōjo* literally means ‘young girl’ and is often used as the name of a genre of fiction targeting young women audiences (King, 2023, pp. 214–215).

Eventually, the *shōjo* must leave this space and enter adulthood, facing the societal expectations that follow (Honda, 2009, p. 36; King, 2023, p. 214). An S relationship was also presumed to eventually come to an end when one or both girls involved left their youth and reached adulthood, leaving the *shōjo* space the S relationship existed within behind. S existed between the open acknowledgment of same-sex love, being treated as such by sexologists of the period, and as homosocial relations between “sisters” that were liminal, platonic and would eventually fade (Dollase, 2003, p. 744; Pflugfelder, 2005, pp. 142, 148).

The themes seen in S were later picked up again in the late 1990s and subsumed within the popular female-female romance genre, Yuri (Friedman, 2017). Yuri would begin to proliferate over the course of the 2000s with the publication of dedicated magazines; S-inspired schoolgirl romances remained prominent in the genre (Friedman, 2022, pp. 14–15). The school setting, Friedman (2022, p. 15) argues, places a “curtain” around the characters, separating them from “real-life” issues that may be faced in a same-sex relationship. The school acts a *shōjo* space in these narratives, one that protects the girls from the pressures and realities of society. S and schoolgirl Yuri exist in a liminal space, both clearly queer and yet at the same time limited by the setting of the school and age, assumed to end as the characters graduate and grow out of it. The themes we see in S and Yuri above are also arguably reflected in Kyoto Animation’s adaptation of *Sound! Euphonium*.

In *Sound! Euphonium*, female exclusive relationships also repeatedly blur the line between friendship and romance in a school setting. While it is unclear whether Takeda Ayano took influence from S or Yuri when writing *Sound! Euphonium* (in 2023 she published a Yuri short story), a Yuri reading of the series’ imagery has been acknowledged by the anime’s director, Ishihara Tatsuya (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015, p. 37). Furthermore, the relative lack of important male characters, especially in the anime adaptation, buttresses this connection. The audience is constantly having their attention drawn to female characters, who are frequently shown holding hands in marketing (for example Figure 4.1) and making suggestive remarks to each other.

This image has been redacted by the author for copyright reasons.

Figure 4.1: A promotional image displayed in the May 2019 issue of magazine *New Type* in a collection on the then upcoming movie, *Sound! Euphonium: The Movie – Our Promise: A Brand New Day* featuring Kumiko (right) and deuteragonist Reina (left) holding hands. Source: (Nakagami, 2019).

An example of how the series seems to draw from S and Yuri narratives is the relationship between Kumiko and her senior, Asuka, a fellow euphonium player in the band. Asuka is introduced in an anime-exclusive scene pressing her face up to the window on the clubroom door, making a face as if she is trying to kiss Kumiko (Figure 4.2) – setting up a running gag in the series of Asuka making romantic passes at her juniors. Asuka serves as a mentor to Kumiko, who looks towards her for support and guidance throughout the first two seasons. The relationship formed between Kumiko and Asuka grows so close that the second season of the anime ends with Kumiko running through the school to find Asuka before she graduates to tell her that she “loves” (*daisuki*) her, an expression often used in romantic confessions (Alexy, 2019, p. 6). Ostensibly, this is because Kumiko wants to “hear her [Asuka’s] play the euphonium more” rather than out of romantic desire, but the language used strongly signifies a potentially romantic readings of Kumiko’s feelings towards her senior (‘Harusaki epirōgu’, 2016, 18:42). The pair’s relationship never develops into a romance however, regardless of what the language may signify. They are close enough for Kumiko to run across the school to find Asuka and declare her “love,” yet their relationship is a bond between two schoolgirls

that will end once the senior graduates from the liminal space of the high school. The audience is left to decide whether the language used signifies Kumiko as having romantic feelings for Asuka, or whether the scene is simply an expression of a close bond between a senior and junior club member. The anime keeps queerness to an appropriate period and place, clearly and visibly there, but assumed to eventually come to an end after graduation, always left as a form of love that is too transgressive to leave the confines of youth.



Figure 4.2: Kumiko's senior is introduced, kissing through the window. Source: ('Yōkoso haisukūru', 2015, 09:35).

Moreover, the novels, sold with “Love and Entertainment” emblazoned on the spine of the dust cover of each copy, feature a clear male love interest, Shūichi, whose role in the anime is heavily truncated. His scenes are often shortened or feature Kumiko acting in more hostile ways than in the novel. By the second season he is only present in half of the episodes. In the anime, he is treated akin to an unwanted presence amidst Kumiko’s network of mostly female friends. While in the novel he begins dating Kumiko by the end of the first year in-series, the broadcast anime cuts this entirely. Instead, the movie adaptation of a part of the second-year books, which is being advertised in figure 4.1, sees them start dating at the outset of the film before breaking up (which does occur in the original). The suddenness of this relationship progression is alluded to by Kumiko’s voice actor Kurosawa Tomoyo in an interview with the magazine *New Type* in the issue shown in figure 4.1. Kurosawa describes Shūichi’s scenes as the “warm-up” for the time Kumiko spends with another female character, likening it to going to a café with him and then a bar with someone else after (Kurosawa *et al.*, 2019, p. 18). Fellow actress Ayaka Asai describes this as the difference between “*koī*” and “*ai*” (Kurosawa *et al.*, 2019, p.

18), two words that can translate into love in English, though she does not specify who each word is directed towards. These words can also signify different forms of love as while they can both be read as explicitly romantic, in other contexts *ai* may simply refer to a spiritual affection, contrasted to a more carnal *koi* (Shibamoto-Smith, 1999; Saeki, 2010; Long, 2024). Audiences (and even the voice actors) are left to speculate on Kumiko's relationship with her female bandmate – is it *ai* or *koi* or just intense friendship and what does the difference between these terms mean? The phrasing maintains ambiguity in how Kumiko and Reina's relationship should be viewed. From the perspective of signification, the language surrounding Kumiko and Reina points to multiple potential meanings. Consumers are left to use their own understanding of youthful relationships in high school to speculate on the nature of the pair's relationship.

### **The “Chain-Link Fence Slam:” Homosocial or Homoerotic?**

The vague line between intense homosociality and queer romance is just as visible in *Free!* through its focus on “intense friendships,” as an advert for *Free!*'s second season frames it (Pash! henshūbu, 2014, p. 39). Ambiguity is facilitated not only by the original text of the anime, but also by the way in which those involved in production represent important scenes and characters in interviews and advertisements. Central to this ambiguity, as will be discussed in more detail below, is the way it appeals to *fujoshi* (literally rotten girls) – fans of Boys Love (BL) media – and their ‘rotten’ (*fu*) fantasies male-male romance. As Santos (2020, pp. 73-74) argues, the “rotteness” of these girls lies in how their fantasies seek to break down, or rot, “normative notions of masculinity and male homosociality” through the queer lens they read male-male relationships with. When presented with scenes of intense homosociality between male characters, these *fujoshi* can use their “rotten” perspective to see the queer possibilities offered by that text (Galbraith, 2013). At the same time, such readings can also be denied as mere fantasies produced by the ‘rotten’ brains of the *fujoshi* – a reading of a text that is clearly incorrect to those who are not ‘rotten.’ Central to the coexistence of both readings is ambiguity – the possibility of multiple valid readings that a text ‘floats’ between. As I argue below, *Free!* sustains two separate, but equally plausible, readings: one that is homoerotic and directed this *fujoshi* audience, and one that is homosocial and meant for everyone else.



To highlight how the language of the series facilitates ambiguity, I want to focus on one scene from the fourth episode of the first season of *Free!* where Haru is confronted by his main rival, Rin, and shoved against a chain-link fence.

Haru: I only swim free(style). I won't swim for you.

Rin: No. You'll swim for me.

Haru: In that case, I want you to promise me something. If you lose don't say you're going to quit. Don't embarrass yourself. Don't cry if you lose.

Rin: Ha! I'm not the little kid from back then. This time I'll make the difference between me and you clear ('Toware no batafurai', 2013, 15:55, adapted from Crunchyroll's translation).

This scene is an intense declaration of Rin's intent to beat Haru in a race during the regional qualifying heats for the national championship, a way to prove he has overcome Haru, to whom Rin has to this point held a severe inferiority complex. However, the way this scene was framed, from the musical direction to the visuals, as well as how it is discussed in published instead point to the existence of a different, queer reading of this text.

The background music is an upbeat piano tune, a seeming complete mismatch with the intense declaration of rivalry that it accompanies. While the music direction of the series was designed under director Utsumi's request to be "pop-y," "cheerful" and "stylish" (Katō, 2013, p. 121), there are intense songs that would fit such a declaration of rivalry. The dissonance between the tone of the dialogue and the musical direction of the scene draws attention to the disconnect between Rin's words to Haru and his actual feelings. As Rin's voice actor, Miyano Mamoru (2013, p. 50) explains, viewers would "hopefully understand that there was something else" behind his desire to win. Viewers are invited to speculate on what that this "something else" being signified by the text might be.

Aiding in this speculation is the visual framing of the scene, some images are included in figures 4.3 and 4.4. In the brief scene, Rin confronts Haru outside. Haru, who is disinterested in Rin's declarations of rivalry, begins to walk away before Rin grabs him and slams him against a nearby chain-link fence. This is followed by 15-20 seconds of the two exchanging glances and gestures before Haru pushes him away, prompting the latter two lines in the above quoted exchange. This scene is referred to, both by the fans

and, though likely adopted from fans, by official sources as the “chain-link fence slam” (*kana’ami-don*) (Miyano, 2013, p. 50; Utsumi, 2013b, p. 49; Yokotani, 2014a). This naming is a play on a common trope of romance manga known as the wall-slam (*kabedon*). In a *kabedon* one character, typically male, pins against the wall another, often female, character, slamming their hand against the wall as they do so as an act of affection (Wetzel, 2018, p. 11). The usage of the imagery of the *kabedon* here points to readings of the scene that understand the “something else” that Rin is feeling as romantic. The adoption of the “chain-link fence slam” terminology by official voices adds to this – working as a soft acknowledgment of the reading without outright confirming it. Here, we can start to see how this single scene produces two distinctive readings – one homosocial and one homoerotic, but both supported by the words and actions of the producers and actors.



Figure 4.3: Rin (right) slams Haru (left) against a chain-link fence - the “chain-link fence slam”. Source: (‘Toraware no batafurai!’, 2013, 16:04).



Figure 4.4: Close-up of Rin and Haru shortly after the latter is slammed against the fence. Source: (‘Toraware no batafurai!’, 2013, 16:07).

The simultaneous possibility of dual readings is well-represented by how the scene is discussed by director Utsumi Hiroko, and the series main writer Yokotani Masahiro. For Utsumi, the appeal of *Free!* is that it is “truly youth” and that it is a story about the “bonds between boys” (*shōnen tachi no kizuna*) (Utsumi, 2013a, 2014a, p. 75). In doing so, she seems to downplay the importance of the sports to the series, the series may be about swimming *bukatsu*, but what is important is their “youth” and “bonds.” On the one hand, these stories are set in the homosociality of *bukatsu* and sports, which as discussed earlier are frequently heavily cisheteronormative in their set-up. At the same time, viewers are directed to focus on the character relationships and question the feelings that exist between them and look beyond homosocial explanations for their actions.

The existence of other readings of *Free!* are a major theme in Yokotani’s interviews, where he arguably encourages queer interpretations of Rin and Haru’s relationship. For example, his description of the chain-link fence slam scene in a guide book for the series references the possibility of another, potentially romantic reading, describing how Rin’s dialogue would “sound like it had a different meaning with just a small change in nuance” (Yokotani, 2014b, p. 76). He remains somewhat vague in his wording here – the reader is left to wonder what “change” and what “nuance” he is talking about. When Rin asks Haru to “swim” for him, Yokotani here seems to be suggesting that there is another way to read those feelings – one that may go beyond a simple declaration of rivalry. What this other meaning is becomes clearer when looking at interviews Yokotani has given in other places, and especially to magazines targeting female audiences.

One example of Yokotani pointing to a possible queer reading can be found in figure 4.5, which contains a section of a page from a special feature on *Free!* in *Otomedial*, a popular culture magazine that targets a female fanbase referred to as *otome*. While the *otome* will be discussed more in the next chapter, a major usage of term since the mid-2000s in the popular media has been to refer to female fans interested in relationships with, or between, attractive male characters (e.g., *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2006; Ohara, 2007). In the section of this feature seen in figure 4.5, Yokotani points to six scenes that he felt reflects the “bonds between the characters” with a brief comment – the chain-link fence slam being one of these scenes (Yokotani, 2014a). In fact, in contrast to the longer explanations he gives for the other scenes, he simply remarks that this is “no matter how

you put it, a chain-link fence slam” (Yokotani, 2014a). Yokotani’s presence can be read as legitimating the queer reading of the emotions underpinning the chain-link fence slam, providing a voice from Kyoto Animation seemingly acknowledging it through his participation here. Moreover, the multi-page figure 4.5 originates from presents a variety of possible male-male character pairings to the consumer alongside highlighting key moments between those characters (*Otomedial*, 2014b; *Otomedial*, 2014c). These pairings are presented with food-based language refers to the variety of couplings presented as if they were arrangements of food (*tabeawase*); the reader is encouraged to find their favourite arrangement, or pair of characters. The language and imagery of *Free!* signifies a potential queer reading of relationships between the characters, with Yokotani legitimating such readings through his presence.



Figure 4.5: A section from a special feature in the magazine *Otomedial*. The section shows "delicious eating arrangements," with the Chain-link fence slam at the middle-top row. Underneath each is a comment from Yokotani Masahiro about the scene.

Source: (Yokotani, 2014a)

In various interviews, creatives that worked on *Free!* have also indicated that they see a gendered divide in how any given scene is read and what the language and imagery may signify to the consumer about the relationship between characters. For these creatives, there appears to be two readings of the text – the male, homosocial one and the female, queer one. Yokotani (2013, p. 53, 2014b, p. 77) variously describes how the show introduced him to things he “had never known” and how the female staff would frequently

have conversations that were “difficult to understand” from the “male perspective” (*dansei mokusen*). Their focus was primarily, in his view, on the small talk and gestures of the characters (Yokotani, 2013, p. 53). Another male producer at Animation Do similarly describes how the series drew heavily from the female staff at the animation studio, as well as “men who understood the feelings of women” (Utsumi *et al.*, 2014, p. 84), which could be code for male fans of BL or gay members of the team. The female perspective alluded to here holds significant similarities to what has been referred to in scholarship on *fujoshi* as the “rotten filter,” a queering lens applied to the world that reads same-sex relationships from the media (Galbraith, 2011; Saitō, 2019, p. 120). The female perspective is one that looks beyond the homosocial, sports-based, reading and towards the relationships between characters. The vagueness with which the female perspective is described allows consumers to imagine that there are people like them inside production and that the series was, even if it has not been directly stated, designed with a queer lens. At the same time, if one was to not know this, to not “understand” this ‘female’ way of looking at things, then all they would see is an intense sporting rivalry, the queer reading would remain hidden or non-existent. Neither reading is privileged by the producers, who allude to the possibility that the text may signify either reading in their interviews. There is a continuum between homosociality and homoeroticism, the text of *Free!* does not draw a clear line between them in how it represents the relationships between men. As a result, it is left to consumers to fight over the signification of meaning in *Free!* – which they have on social media over the decade since the first season aired.

### **“Homo Swimming:” The Divide between ‘Normal’ and ‘Rotten’**

The discourse amongst consumers surrounding *Free!* has long compared the series imagery to that of BL, defined by the difference between the lens applied to it – a “normal” or a “rotten” one. The drawing of comparisons between same-sex romance and *Free!* begun even before the series aired. Multiple sites aggregating news about the series both prior to and after its release derogatorily referred to the anime as “homo swimming” (*homo suiei*) (E.g., Hachima kikō, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; mura\_bow, 2013; *Homo suiei*, no date). The imagery and language of *Free!* was clearly understood to potentially signify queer readings of the text. Despite recognising the potential signification of queerness by *Free!*, these users did not however consider the characters themselves “homo.” Instead these commenters used “homo” as a descriptor for imagery that as one X/Twitter user

noted, described “characters blatantly coded as gay males for female users” (mura\_bow, 2013). While *Free!* was identified as offering a “homo” reading, this queer reading was the target of derision, spoken about as a form of bait and as a marketing tactic targeting a female audience.

The connection between *Free!* and queer imagery is also reflected in a trend on Twitter of people posting as the show’s first season aired between July and September 2013 with the phrase “*Free!* is often called homo, but let’s look at (example of “homo” imagery from another show).” The other examples were typically suggestive shots in shows with no explicitly gay characters, such as in figure 4.6, or jokes about gay characters from various anime. To these commentators, *Free!* “homo”-ness was not in its use of actual queer characters or narratives, but rather in its ability to bait female fans into watching it when there was nothing there. Even as these commenters recognised the queerness of the series, they reject queer readings as a valid interpretation of the series for anything other than either making jokes about female fans or for expressing their own homophobia. The presumption by these commenters that the relationship between the characters was homosocial led them to reject the possibility of a homoromantic reading.



Figure 4.6: An example of the X/Twitter trend in 2013 of providing examples of "homo" scenes from other anime in the format “*Free!* is often called homo, but let’s look at [an example of “homo” imagery from another show]”.

When other users queried whether *Free!* was really “homo” on platforms such as Q&A site Yahoo! Chiebukuro, the answers would immediately seek to reassure them that the series was not actually “homo” (Yahoo! Chiebukuro, 2013, 2014b). People who truly

saw the series as “homo” were simply misbehaving “rotten cockroaches” (*gokifuri*) spreading a “misunderstanding” (Yahoo! Chiebukuro, 2014b).<sup>31</sup> As we saw above, these commenters recognised the queer readings of *Free!*, but rejected the suggestion the text was actually be signifying a queer reading. Instead, those who believed in the possibility there was an intended queer reading signified by the text were mocked as “misunderstanding” the intentions of the writers. In the internet discourse, these different approaches to what the language of *Free!* signifies are contrasted and presented as mutually exclusive by users. The construction of bifurcated ‘normal’ and female, ‘rotten,’ lenses, holds similarities to the comments by script writer Yokotani. The normal reading saw the series as not actually depicting queerness - the relationships between these characters were nothing more than intense friendships being misread. By contrast, the rotten, female, readings saw the series as queer, and that this reading was not only intentionally included by the producers but was the point of watching *Free!*.

As the constant references to them may suggest, *Free!* has a large audience who are also BL fans. Commercial BL manga fan site Chill Chill’s users for example rated the second season and first movie their favourite anime of the year in 2015 and 2016 (Chill Chill, 2015, 2016). Crucial to the circulation of queer readings of *Free!* has been the multi-lingual community on sites such as YouTube and Nico Nico Douga that reupload short clips of the series online.<sup>32</sup> YouTube in particular is very popular and influential in Japan – in my survey 79.5% of my respondents reported using it. These large, international online platforms have shaped how consumers discuss the signification of meaning in *Free!*, connecting consumers from a variety of backgrounds who approach the text from different perspectives. As Morimoto (2019) argues, online fandom can be looked at as a “contact zone,” a space for communities to connect beyond race, gender or language, rather by interest in a single product. While many videos of *Free!* on YouTube are titled in English, they still appear in a Japanese language search. Some include key terms in Japanese, such as names of popular fan couples (e.g., P. Porchorawkorraw, 2016), likely to ensure that the clip has the widest reach and is recommended to both Japanese

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<sup>31</sup> *Gokifuri* is a play on words replacing the third character *bu* from the word for cockroach (*gokiburi*) with *fu*, meaning rotten.

<sup>32</sup> The clips themselves are also frequently taken from English subtitled versions, seemingly either taken from pirated reuploads of the Crunchyroll version or people downloading clips already available, editing them and reuploading them with the subtitles intact.

and English-speaking users. For example, the most popular upload of the chain-link fence slam on YouTube is a video entitled “Rin and Haru almost kiss” with 500,000 views, an edit that changes the background music to a sad instrumental (Hi Z, 2014). Even without entirely understanding the title, a fan can easily work out from the change in music the tone of the edit and what is being signified about the emotions of the scene. The YouTube algorithm is then likely to recommend the user similar videos presenting queer readings, further influencing what meanings are associated with the original ambiguous text. Thus, two different understandings of *Free!* circulated through different means: homosocial readings on Twitter and anonymous message boards against queer readings on video sharing sites.

More recently, the rise of TikTok, a short video sharing site where one can easily share edited videos in minimal time, has seen a notable shift towards the ‘rotten’ reading over the ‘normal’ one. While in my survey just 12.5% of all respondents reported using TikTok, this number rises sharply to 33% amongst those under 25 – suggesting the platform may be particularly influential on younger generations in Japan. On TikTok, where clips often lack any titles and are simply defined by hashtags, *Free!* becomes so removed from the context of sports and youth that it is treated as if it were a pure BL anime. The most popular edits on the site of *Free!* focus on short, 20-30 second clips of character interactions that can be read as queer with little additional context and are frequently tagged as BL. As can be seen in the example of figure 4.7, the most popular clip under the *Free!* tag on TikTok, these clips are tagged as BL, with the top comments riffing on how queer the interaction is. On both this example, and on other clips, there are also often multiple comments either asking if the clip is from a BL or for a source – and these comments are frequently multilingual. There is often a Japanese presence in videos made by an English-speaking creator and vice-versa, and the comments being made are largely similar, focusing on the suggestive nature of the interactions. As the series goes quiet with the release of the final movie in 2022, sharing through global social media such as TikTok is likely to become the main way through which people are introduced to the series. How people approach the signification of meaning in *Free!* have been shifted over the past eleven years by the discourse on the platforms that consumers encounter the series on – the meaning of *Free!*’s ambiguous text continues shift. On TikTok, and if one



was to search for clips on YouTube, a consumer is introduced to the series primarily through its queer elements, which are now presented as the “normal” reading.

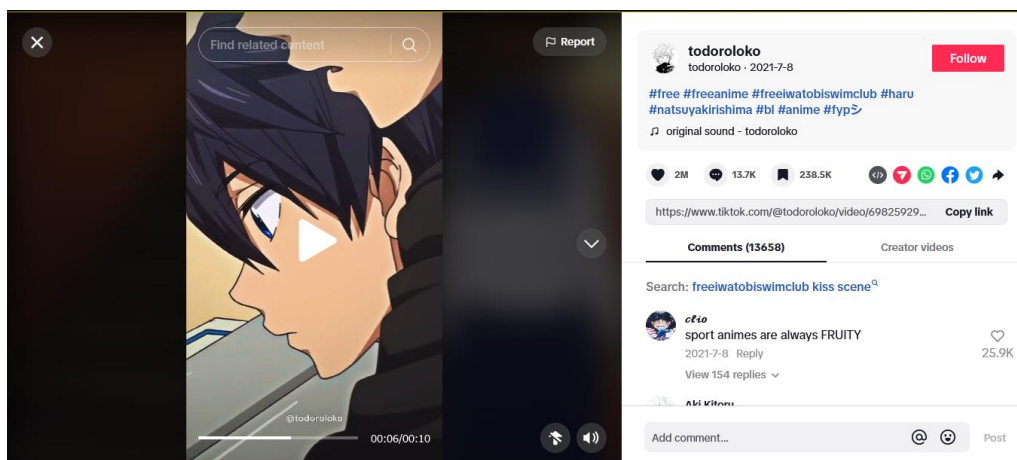


Figure 4.7: the time of writing, the top watched clip on TikTok under the #freeiwatobiswimclub tag including the most liked comment referring to it as “fruity” – slang for gay. The clip is from the 2015 prequel movie *High Speed! Free! Starting Days*. Source: (todoroloko, 2021)

### A Declaration of Love: Not a “Straightforward” Yuri

The prominence of, and wide acceptance by viewers of, queer readings is even more visible when looking at *Sound! Euphonium* and its depiction of the relationship between the main character Kumiko and the deuteragonist Reina. Kumiko and Reina’s relationship evokes the imagery and tone of Yuri, a fact that is even acknowledged by the director and staging director in an interview about the series (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015). During a live rewatch of the series in June 2023 on the online streaming platform Abema, viewers in the comments would frequently spam the chat suggesting the pair kiss, describing the scenes as erotic and directly questioning if they were viewing Yuri. While *Free!* relies heavily on subtext and allusions to its queer meanings in interviews and the language of the text itself, the signification of queer meanings in *Sound! Euphonium* is far more openly acknowledged by the text, fans and producers.

To illustrate the how queer meanings are constructed in *Sound! Euphonium*, I will focus on one example scene from episode eight of season one, also found in the first book the series is based on. In this scene, Kumiko is on a “date” with Reina, ostensibly to the Agata Festival in Uji, but turns out to be a hike up the local mountain, Daikichiyama.

While the entire scene is laden with innuendo, the following exchange is referred to during an emotional climax several episodes later:

Reina: Kumiko, you have a terrible personality, don't you.

Kumiko: Is that meant to be an insult?

Reina: Its praise. During the middle-school 3<sup>rd</sup> year concert contest, you asked me if I really thought we could make it to the national championships. That's your bad personality.

Kumiko: No, that was just me being curious...Wait that really is an insult after all...

Reina: No. This is my declaration of love (*ai no kokuhaku*) ('Omatsuri toraianguru', 2015, 17:41).

Reina here not only outright utilises *ai*, but she also specifically refers to what she is doing as a “declaration” (*kokuhaku*) of her love towards Kumiko. The term *kokuhaku* holds strong romantic connotations. While generally translated as confession, *kokuhaku* in practice acts as more of a declaration that marks the start of a committed romantic relationship in regular usage and is an indispensable part of dating (Nanae *et al.*, 2007, p. 72; Farrer, Tsuchiya and Bagrowicz, 2008, p. 174; Farrer *et al.*, 2012, p. 272). After the *kokuhaku*, there also generally follows an expectation of a more physical, sexually active relationship (Farrer *et al.*, 2012, p. 272). The *kokuhaku* as this declaration of love from one to another represents the moment a pair become a couple – a romantic relationship has not truly started until this declaration of love is made (Farrer, Tsuchiya and Bagrowicz, 2008, p. 183). The importance of the *kokuhaku* to the progression of a romantic relationship is attested to by both the numerous *kokuhaku* how-to guides online (e.g., #Lily\_magazin, 2021; Nakanishi, 2023), and the various English language sites using the term to explain dating culture in Japan (e.g., Suzuki, 2013; Morales, 2021). For Reina and Kumiko, this scene thus marks them entering the next stage of their relationship with each other. While *ai* alone can communicate a platonic, non-romantic bond that is spiritual rather than carnal (Saeki, 2010; Long, 2024, p. 5), the inclusion of *kokuhaku* in the phrase leaves little room for doubt that the meaning being signified by the language is romantic. Unlike *Free!*, where much of the queer reading for the chain-link fence slam was teased out through the framing, music and surrounding interviews, here the language used is far more explicit. Her confession of love is strong enough to be easily understood as romantic.

The romantic atmosphere continues throughout the scene after they reach the top of the mountain and look over the Agata Festival from the observation point. The climax, during which Reina declares her character motivations, is set to soft piano, before building up to a climax where Reina asks to be called by her first name and running her finger down Kumiko's face (figures 4.8 and 4.9). This scene ends with the pair, over the ending credits, playing a duet titled "The Place Where I Found Love." The entire scene serves to only intensify romantic readings of the relationship between Kumiko and Reina.



Figure 4.8: Reina (left) and Kumiko (right) at the top of Daikichiyama together.  
(‘Omatsuri toraianguru’, 2015, 20:23).



Figure 4.9: Reina runs her finger down Kumiko's face and onto her lips. Source:  
(‘Omatsuri toraianguru’, 2015, 20:25).

This scene on the mountain between the pair also appears in the original novel, down to the *ai no kokuhaku* by Reina towards Kumiko, however the framing and build-

up is vastly different. In the novel, the scene starts with Reina asking about Kumiko's male love interest and ends with Kumiko thinking to herself how she was being teased by Reina (Takeda, 2013, pp. 198–199). The reader is primed with a reminder of the heterosexual romance subplot at the start, and then assured that this entire exchange was likely reflective of Reina's sense of humour, which until now the audience has not seen as Reina has been largely absent from the plot until this scene in the novel. The *ai no kokuhaku* is not dwelled upon in the book, though the scene does mark the start of a close homosocial relationship between Kumiko and Reina. By contrast, *ai no kokuhaku* in the anime is repeated in episode eleven by Kumiko towards Reina in an intense scene where Kumiko declares her undying support for Reina's aspirations within the school band ('Okaeri ōdishon', 2015, 16:12). The scene serves to reinforce Reina's *kokuhaku*, with Kumiko repeating the declaration, indicating their mutual affection for each other. Kyoto Animation in adapting the scene have changed what the language signifies and how it would be understood by consumers – the homosocial explanation is deemphasised, and the nature of Reina's "love" becomes more clearly romantic. The queerness of this scene in the anime is something not lost on the directors, however.

In an interview with the anime mook *AnimeStyle*, directors Ishihara Tatsuya and Yamada Naoko were directly asked about the framing of the relationship between Kumiko and Reina in this scene and its romantic connotations. Ishihara agrees with the characterisation of the scene as potentially romantic, pointing to how Yamada's "Yuri-esque imagery is often pretty hardcore" (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015, p. 37). Yamada protests such a characterisation of the scene, instead arguing that she wanted to depict "youth" and not "straightforward Yuri" (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015, p. 37). For Yamada, what the interviewer and Ishihara see as Yuri-like elements is the result of her wanting to depict the "feelings" (*omoi*) of Reina and Kumiko and capture their perspective (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015, p. 37). Here, we see a divide similar to Utsumi and Yokotani's on *Free!* with one director affirming the queer reading and the other attempting to dampen them - showing conflicting approaches to the signification of meaning in this text. Yamada, much like Utsumi, once again evokes "youth" as the explanation for what she was representing; the seemingly queer interactions can be explained by the youthful, girlhood space their relationship takes place in. That this youthful relationship was understood as Yuri by the male interviewer and Ishihara was due to their own perspective (*mokusen*) as men who

are unable to truly understand feminine youth and how female homosocial bonds are formed (Ishihara *et al.*, 2015, p. 37). Thus, they read romantic subtext from the scene in episode 8 that Yamada denies as the intended reading of the scene. Two alternative readings of the scene are presented to the consumer, and it is down to them to decide what meanings they see the scene as signifying and whether the relationship between Kumiko and Reina is queer or not.

### **Representing ‘Love’ in Uji: Location and Language**

Alongside the language of the scene itself, the setting of the scene – Daikichiyama during the Agata Matsuri - is also important to how the relationship between Kumiko and Reina can be read. Significant scholarship exists that points to the difference setting can make to how interactions are understood. Knopp (2007, p. 24) highlights the spatial aspects of gender that determine whether acts such as drag are recognised as such, or just as the norm depending on location. Spaces can be queer areas where norms are challenged and subverted (Suganuma, 2011, pp. 347–348). Here I want to focus on how the setting of *Sound! Euphonium*, Uji in Kyoto prefecture, influences the way the text can be read and what meanings are signified by the language of the text.

One example of the importance of location is seen in the role of the Agata Matsuri - an annual festival held in Uji in early June - in the narrative of *Sound! Euphonium*. The festival appears in both in the anime and novels, with Kumiko attending each year. This festival is explicitly given romantic undertones in the narrative. In first year, Kumiko goes with Reina, leading to the mountain scene discussed earlier, to cover for not wanting to go with her supposed male love interest Shūichi. The episode itself references this, being called “Festival Triangle!” a reference to both the instrument, and the love triangle between Shūichi, Kumiko and her friend (‘Omatsuri toraianguru’, 2015). In the second year, she goes with Shūichi, who she is now dating, however the event precipitates their break-up shortly after, alluded to when Kumiko rejects a kiss from Shūichi (*Hibike! Yūfoniāmu: Chikai no fināre*, 2019). To an audience that is not specifically familiar with Uji, they are presented the festival simply as a location for romance, and in both the first and second year of the series, it plays this role. The Agata Festival is a space for romance in the series, both heterosexual with Shūichi, and homoerotic with Reina; the viewer is left to determine how to read the interactions and language within. Which reading is more

prominent depends on the distance the audience has from the city, and the way it which it frames the interactions between the characters.

The potential romantic implications of scenes set during the festival are further enhanced by the context behind the it. The Agata Festival has, amongst other names, historically been nicknamed the *tanemorai matsuri* (the sperm-giving festival) in reference to how the festival once ended with some participants engaging in intercourse under the dark of the night. As discussed previously, the first-year scene during the festival revolves around a “declaration of love,” with Kumiko and Reina alone atop a dim nearby mountain overlooking the festival. Knowledge of the history of the festival and its relationship with procreation may further enhance the romantic, if not outright sexual, undertones of this declaration, which already uses phrasing that has strong sexual connotations. While the scene is already framed in a way that may be perceived as romantic based only on how the Agata Festival is portrayed in *Sound! Euphonium*, additional knowledge of the region enhances its queerness. Knowledge of Uji and the Agata Festival serves to further support a queer reading of the relationship between Reina and Kumiko and the emotions being signified by the “declaration of love.”

*Sound! Euphonium* holds a particularly close geographical relationship with Kyoto Animation as it is set in Uji city in Kyoto prefecture, where the main studios of the company are also located. Uji in *Sound! Euphonium* is, unsurprisingly, portrayed extremely accurately, many locations are exact copies of how they look in real life. The city is also prominent in Japanese popular culture as the setting for the classic text *The Tale of Genji*, as a tourist destination and for its green tea. For the average viewer in Japan, Uji is likely to be recognisable at least by name and potentially by its famous landmarks. Yet, most major tourist sights are not shown in the shots of Uji, nor are famous local products such as tea, in favour of a far more localised feel that represents Uji as it is for residents rather than visitors. The city government has itself taken advantage of this accuracy, distributing maps with key locations marked, with the tourist offices being covered in posters and standees for the series (Figure 4.10). At the same time, Kyoto Animation notably sanitises Uji, making it pass for a generic Japanese city. The particularities of the city are missing, for example. Character accents, which in the novel are typical of the area with all but Kumiko speaking in the local dialect, are removed in the adaptation which features standard Japanese. From a distance, Uji becomes a stand-

in for the generic Japanese mid-sized city and in doing so, becomes a more normative locality, scrubbed of differences in accents and local culture.



Figure 4.10: One wall of a tourist office in Uji covered in *Sound! Euphonium* posters and standees in late May 2023. Photo by author.

However, physically going to Uji provides a different experience of the city and its relationship with *Sound! Euphonium*, one that instead presents a much queerer reading of the text. As figure 4.10 shows, the focus of the imagery at the tourism office is almost exclusively on Reina and Kumiko, or with Kumiko and different female characters, holding hands or lying against each other. When I went in May 2023 there was only a single image featuring Kumiko and Shūichi, a poster for the second-year film (seen in Figure 4.11). Fans that visited Uji would write in a visitor's notebook, seen in figure 4.11, their speculations on the nature of the relationships between the female characters of the series and whether these relationships were truly only friendship. In this notebook, amongst shorter comments simply saying where they were visiting from, were short drawn comics of Reina teasing Kumiko romantically, such as one where Reina says she wants Kumiko for her birthday. In contrast to the Uji seen in the anime, visiting the city exposes visitors to a greater focus on pseudo-romantic imagery between the female characters and places greater focus on the queer readings signified by the language and imagery of the series.





Figure 4.11: A notebook in one of the Uji City tourist offices for fans of Sound!

Euphonium to leave messages in. Picture by author.

The greater exposure to pseudo-romantic imagery from visiting Uji was perhaps most prominent with the (as of October 2023 closed) app *Butai meguri* (Sony Music Solutions, 2013). This app was prominently advertised on the *Sound! Euphonium* tourism maps when I went to Uji and allowed users to locate places seen in the anime through GPS and take photos featuring the characters, represented by digital stickers, and upload them online. For example, if one was to go to the peak of Daikichiyama, you could take a photo with a superimposed sticker of Reina and Kumiko sitting together and holding hands (Figure 4.12). Through the app, you can place the seemingly romantic imagery of the sticker into the real-life location of the *ai no kokuhaku*. Moreover, with few exceptions, only the female characters appeared on these stickers; even the location corresponding to Kumiko and Shūichi's date during the Agata Festival in the second-year movie did not provide stickers featuring him. The intention behind the selection of stickers for a location is never made explicit. The user is left to interpret what the image means and how they see the characters in the context of it. Those who do not go to Uji never experience this, however. The signification of meaning within *Sound! Euphonium* is closely linked to location, with the romantic reading of the text more ambiguous to those unable to visit



Uji. From a distance, Uji remains a normative city space, and the queer possibilities within inaccessible.



Figure 4.12: An image from the top of Daikichiyama taken using the *Butai meguri* app with the default sticker at the time of visiting in May 2023. Photo by author.

### **A Queer Space away from home: Sydney in *Free!***

While *Sound! Euphonium* provides an example of how locality is constructed within Japan, *Free!* exemplifies how the representation of international locations can also influence signification, either by queering the narrative or providing normative covers for queerness. The main setting of the first two seasons, Iwatobi, is based on Iwami, a town in Tottori, the least populated prefecture in Japan. The third season and final movies are mostly set in Tokyo. However, Sydney, Australia also plays a prominent role in the plot and is repeatedly visited throughout. Sydney appears mainly in three places: in flashbacks of Haru's rival Rin, who studied there over middle school and the first year of high school; in the present day, during a trip in the twelfth episode of season two and then in Rin's later appearances after he returns there after graduating high school. For the first two seasons, representations of Sydney are in certain ways that of a generic foreign city, like how Uji appears like a mid-size Japanese city in *Sound! Euphonium*. At the same time, Sydney is a place that is both markedly non-Japanese and specifically Australian.

This particularity is constructed primarily through language, with scenes set in Australia typically taking place in English. The accents of the Australian characters are exaggerated; the first phrase said by members of Rin's old host family is "G'day," a term heavily associated with Australian-English ('Ikyō no suimuofu!', 2014, 09:41). Sydney is not just a foreign land speaking English, but identifiably Australian. Yet, while *Free!* plays to linguistic stereotypes of Australia, it does not play so strongly to common stereotypes of the country as a "fenceless zoo" in the first two seasons (McArthur, 2006, p. 575). We are not shown wide shots of outback wilderness, landmarks, or stereotypical Australian animals, rather the focus is on Sydney as a place of everyday life.<sup>33</sup> Sydney is depicted realistically, with every location identifiable and, while names are changed, this extends as far as local restaurants and hotels. The specificity of these city locations helps facilitate a queer reading of the text.

For example, the hotel plays such a role in episode 12 of season two. At the hotel, Rin and Haru are given a room with a double bed rather than a twin room, which Rin specifically claiming this to be unusual for Australia, blaming the mistake on Haru's feminine name ('Ikyō no suimuofu!', 2014, 13:27). Given Rin's name is similarly feminine, if the person handling their booking was familiar enough with Japanese names to mistake them for a couple when assigning rooms, they may have still seen them as a same-sex couple. That Rin is adamant that this is unusual in Australia also highlights how their situation is defined as against the norms of the country as he understands them and draws more attention to the queer reading of the scene. The scene leaves open several interpretations for audiences, from language barriers to imperfect knowledge of local norms, however most are predicated on the foreignness of Sydney, and Australia more widely. Not only are the pair in a foreign land, distant from Japan with its own norms, but they are placed into a situation that further subverts those norms to put the two into the same bed. The setting of Sydney also stands-out from a queer perspective – the city has a large LGBTQ+ community and plays host to the yearly gay and lesbian Mardi Gras event (Markwell, 2002; Arrow, 2018). While such context is unlikely to be recognisable to much of the Japanese audience – for those familiar with Sydney its connection to queer

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<sup>33</sup> Season three, with the change in director is not quite the same on this; Sydney is immediately shown with kangaroos on its beaches and Rin living in eyeshot of the opera house.

cultures in Australia serves to further enhance a queer reading of Rin and Haru's trip to the city. With the release of Li Kotomi's *Solo Dance* in 2018, the protagonist of which participates in the Mardi Gras, the connection between Sydney and queerness may also be increasingly drawn by Japanese readers as well (Stenburg, 2024). While the original episode may have aired in 2014, how it is understood continues to be shifted in the years since as new associations are made with the city in the Japanese media sphere. Sydney is a zone of queer possibilities and accidents that may not happen in Japan and are facilitated by its alien nature to the Japanese viewer, a place that is outside of their common sense.

In the same episode, Rin introduces Haru to his former host parents, who immediately know who Haru is and are aware of several of his quirks, including food habits and his favourite swimming style. This is even commented on by Haru with Rin unable to give a clear answer as to why he had told them so much about him ('Ikyō no suimuofu!', 2014, 10:44). His host mother explains that Rin "really looks up to" Haru and was "full of admiration," statements followed by the host mother winking at Rin. The host father soon thereafter asks if Rin has a girlfriend ('Ikyō no suimuofu!', 2014, 10:48, 11:56). The entire scene has a heteronormative explanation when read literally: a young, initially lonely Rin, speaking about his best friend to his host family, who are accommodating him based on what they were told years ago. However, the presentation of the scene points to a queer reading; the language of "admiration" and the mother's wink followed quickly by discussion of girlfriends could be read as the parents trying to work out if Rin and Haru are dating, or to hint at Rin's possible feelings for Haru. The language of the scene can signify either reading, leaving it ambiguous as to whether Rin's feelings towards Haru are homosocial or queer.

This is also the first time that audiences, or Haru on-screen, are introduced to Rin's living parental figures. While Rin's late father plays an important role in his motivations, his mother only briefly appears on-screen at scattered moments in media for the series released after 2017. Yet, he not only introduces his Australian former host family, taking Haru abroad to do so, but also seems to have spoken extensively about Haru to them. Whereas Rin's Japanese family are left unaware of the extent of Rin's "admiration" towards Haru, his Australian host family openly speak of it. In the *Free!* universe, these are feelings that can only be expressed to the Australian one. Sydney is represented as a place where Rin can be more open, with the norms portrayed here allowing this, and thus

queer readings of his relationships take a more central role. Everything from hotels, to language, to family in Australia point to a far greater focus on queerness than is presented as possible in Japan. In Kyoto Animation created universes, geography plays a central role, in *Free!* serving to enhance queerness away from Japan, while tempering it within the country. What is signified by the language used in the series and how explicit the queer meanings are is closely connected to the spaces it occurs within series.

### **Fairy Tales of Queerness: *Liz and the Blue Bird***

While the examples provided until now have focused on television series screening between 2013 and 2015, the ambiguity of queer theming, later series suggest that a shift may be underway, one in which queerness becomes more explicit, to the point the homosocial reading is unsustainable. This shift can be seen in the anime-original 2018 film *Liz and the Blue Bird* (*Rizu to aoi tori*) that emerged from the *Sound! Euphonium* universe. The film heavily focuses on a fictional European fairy tale of the same name. This fairy tale has, in-universe, been adapted into a concert piece, which is one of the works being performed by the band during the second year of the story. The plot follows two of Kumiko's seniors: Kasaki Nozomi and Yoroizuka Mizore, who have been close friends since middle school and play the flute and oboe respectively, and their development as they practice a duet between the titular Liz and the blue bird, a movement called "a decision made out of love" (*ai yue no ketsudan*) (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018). Throughout the film, there are also interspersed sections directly adapting the fairy tale, communicating its basic plot to the viewer in stages. The plot of the movie focuses on the relationship of Nozomi and Mizore, and their attempts to understand its direction through the eponymous fairy tale and tune, eventually leading to their choice to distance themselves before reconciling during the final scenes. In *Liz and the Blue Bird*, unlike *Sound! Euphonium* or *Free!*, the language and imagery clearly signifies a queer reading over any homosocial understanding of the relationship between Nozomi and Mizore.

*Liz and the Blue Bird* is a bittersweet narrative. A lonely girl called Liz one day meets another young girl after a violent storm, who she takes in. They become close, and Liz increasingly becomes dependent on the young girl for emotional support, even sleeping in the same bed together. However, one day the girl, who is revealed to be a blue bird that somehow transformed itself into a human, disappears, leaving Liz alone again. Liz thus resolves to stand on her own, spending the rest of her life happy as an expression

of her love (*ai yue*) for the blue bird (*Dōwa 'Rizu to aoi tori' sutōrī*, no date). *Liz and Blue Bird* shares significant similarities to Japanese fairy tales that feature animals transforming into humans and seeking romantic relationships with them, but ultimately failing as the animal is killed or leaves (Fraser, 2017, pp. 22–23). While romance is never explicitly made clear in the narrative, it matches with the norms of romance within the fairy tale genre as it has appeared in Japan. Within the pastel-coloured, bright narrative of *Liz and the Blue Bird*, the queerness of the central relationship is key, both as a narrative crossing human-animal lines, and as a same-sex narrative between the female leads.

In the same way as *shōjo* space and the S relationships discussed earlier, the queer relationship in the narrative is liminal and comes to an end, with the titular Liz learning to stand on her own without the blue bird. This connects into how the movie then portrays the main characters of the movie, Mizore and Nozomi, and their relationship that mirrors that of the fairy tale, a fact even commented on by Nozomi early in the movie (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 10:52). The movie depicts the pair as mutually dependent on each other, Mizore even copying the movements of Nozomi during the first act. As Mizore puts it, she always tries to “follow what Nozomi decides to do” (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 52:19). We are initially shown that Mizore is the stand-in for Liz, even receiving a blue feather at the start of the film from Nozomi (Figure 4.13). Throughout the film, Mizore is motivated by a wish to cage Nozomi and keep their relationship unchanging, even choosing her university based on where she believes Nozomi is planning to attend. Mizore seeks to cling to the intimate bond they have formed and to never let it change, even as they mature and graduate from high school and leave their youth behind. The relationship between the pair, mirroring the seemingly romantic narrative of the in-universe fairy tale, is extremely queer. Yet, at the same time this relationship is something that Mizore is depicted as needing to grow out of – she needs to let Nozomi go for the sake of growing up and leaving her youth.



Figure 4.13: Mizore with the blue feather at various points in *Liza and the Blue Bird*.

Source: (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 04:53, 22:07, 43:46, 01:11:51)

As the story progresses, we are also shown that the reverse is true – Nozomi also needs to let go of Mizore. Nozomi’s own dependencies on Mizore are revealed to the audience in the final twenty minutes of the movie as the final section of the fairy tale is adapted. Unlike the original ending of the fairy tale where the blue bird suddenly leaves however, in the version we are shown Liz encourages the blue bird to leave so it can spread its wings and reach its full potential (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 01:03:40). Simultaneously, Nozomi decides she needs to let Mizore go. As one character describes it, this is the “blue bird’s way of expressing love (*ai no arikata*),” framing it in the terms of explicitly romantic language (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 01:06:20). As has been brought up throughout this chapter, *ai*, the term for love used here, typically has romantic connotations, and is what is used here to describe Mizore’s blue bird’s feelings towards Nozomi’s Liz. In this reading, Liz attempts to set the blue bird free herself, describing it as “my way of expressing love. I love you” (*ai shiteru wa*), again using direct language to describe her feelings (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 01:05:04). The language used may be romantic, but the context is one of letting go, of accepting that their present relationship is unsustainable and cannot progress out of their youth. This does not preclude the possibility of the pair becoming a couple later on, but that what they are experiencing now is the end of the queer possibilities of their youth: the moment they must turn towards becoming an adult.

In the actual moment in the movie the two ‘split,’ with Nozomi freeing Mizore, the language avoids the explicitness of *ai*, preferring more ambiguous phrasing such as *daisuki* and *suki*, which can both be used completely platonically and romantically. The scene features Mizore referring to Nozomi as “completely special” (*zenbu tokubetsu*) to

her and giving her a “I love you hug” (*daisuki hagu*), a call-back to a previous scene where it was described as a thing done by middle schoolers between friends who declare what they like about them (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 01:16:04). This hug culminates in Mizore’s declaration of what she likes about Nozomi:

Mizore: I like (*suki*) your [Nozomi’s] voice. I like the way you speak. I like the sound of your footsteps. I like your hair. Your, your everything... (*Nozomi, Nozomi no zenbu...*)

Nozomi: I like Mizore’s oboe (*Rizu to aoi tori*, 2018, 01:16:04).

Unlike the explicit declaration seen in the fairy tale, here what appears to be a confession by Mizore of her feelings is instead interrupted by Nozomi interjecting before she can finish. Unlike in the fairy tale version of these events, where their feelings were allowed to be clearly stated, here they are stopped and reeled in. Additionally, the interruption is a signal towards the band, towards the *bukatsu* that links the two of them. Yet, this veil is not perfect. The queer reading remains prominent, if not blatant, yet at the same time it is rejected, at least for now. The band is more important, as is Mizore and Nozomi finding their path in life - exploring their relationship further can wait until after. *Liz and the Blue Bird* presents a less ambiguous representation of queerness and a possible shift in the relationship between signification and queerness. In contrast to the previous examples from *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*, we see how the language signifies a possible homosocial reading but seems to clearly privilege a queer reading in how it depicts the main duo. There is a difference in how queerness interacts with signification in *Liz and the Blue Bird*, a change that may point to a transition to clearer depictions of queer meanings in Kyoto Animation’s texts.

### **Queerness in Transition**

In an interview with the magazine *CD Journal*, Kumiko’s voice actor speaks of recording scenes with Reina’s voice actor, and how at times they would be transported to “a world of only the two of them” (Kurosawa and Suzaki, 2015, p. 13). Yet at the same time, she then speaks of the relationship between Kumiko and the male love interest as the result of her “rebellious stage” (*iya iya ki*, literally no-no period), not being able to be in a relationship with him just yet, implying a lack of maturity to do so (Kurosawa and Suzaki, 2015, p. 13). Kurosawa’s answers reflect the how the language of Kyoto Animation’s

texts, signify both a queer understanding of the words and their possibilities at the same time as a more normative explanation.

Similarly, in a special on *Free!* ahead of the release of its final movie in the anime magazine *Animedia*, Haru's voice actor Shimazaki Nobunaga describes Rin as Haru's "best friend" (*shin'yū*), who feels "betrayed" when he fears that Rin is going somewhere he "cannot reach" through competitive swimming (Shimazaki, 2021, p. 27). The director adds to this in a different interview in the same collection, stating they "fell for each other" (*hokareau*) because they have something the other lacks, referencing the "spirit of their rivalry" (*raiburu kokoro*) (Kawanami and Hatta, 2021, p. 30). The language here plays to two sides, both discussing them in terms of friendship and rivalry, and language that might suggest a queer reading such as "fell for each other," using a verb that is both explicitly used with romantic connotations but can also be platonic. *Free!* is simultaneously a story of "best friends" with a deep rivalry, and one of Haru's fears of being "betrayed" and left alone by Rin, whom he has "fell for." Even outside of the series they are spoken about in terms of two readings: as a cisheteronormative sports story and as a queer coming of age work. Homosociality and homoromantic expression exists on a continuum and the same language can sustain both readings of the relationships in the texts of Kyoto Animation.

The two works discussed here by Kyoto Animation provide an example of how the language of media works produced over the last decade toe the line between being completely queer and cisheteronormative at the same time. At the same time, they also seem to show that there are different levels based on the gender of the characters as to how well covered the queerness is. For *Free!*, a completely cisheteronormative reading is well supported not only by reading the dialogue and character actions through the lens of sports and homosocial youth, but also the general avoidance of outright romantic language. The queerness is far more subtextual, coded into the way the scenes are framed, how the language is depicted and the invitation of audience speculation towards the feelings behind the words. By contrast, *Sound Euphonium*, both in the main series and the anime-original spin-off *Liz and the Blue Bird* places the queer subtext much more in the open – characters openly declare that they "like" and "love" each other, hold hands and are marketed as if they were a couple. At the same time, these same actions can be read through the lens of sisterhood, these queer feelings, if they exist, are liminal and



located in youth. Queerness may be present, but it is not the only reading, nor is it treated as something that will leave the period of youth being depicted.

Central to the way that language and queerness are linked in the works of Kyoto Animation is signification, how meaning is generated from the language of these texts. Key to signification is the framing of the language and how the texts are spoken about in interviews and online discourse. Youth and sports, for example, acts as a frame that provides homosocial explanations for even the most queer of language. For example, when looking at *Sound! Euphonium*, the queer language is often tempered by producers who point to how they only meant to represent a, presumed homosocial, youth. Yet, as the methods by which audiences experience these works so too can the meanings signified by them. For *Free!*, I highlighted a shift in which reading was emphasised in online platforms, with the rise of TikTok indicating a greater importance placed in the queer readings of the text. The ambiguity of *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium*'s language enables multiple readings to be signified by the same text. Looking at these texts through the lens of signification highlights how queer meanings are generated from media texts, and how the dual readings of the relationships are supported by the language and framing of them.

The dual readings reflect upon not only the link between language and signification in these texts, but also on the relationship between the producers and the consumers. That viewers refer to these works, jokingly or not, as Yuri and “homo,” creatives are directly asked about these themes and features in magazines targeted at fans of same-sex romance media is revealing in how they are being marketed. Even when directly asked about queer theming, the response from creatives has been to point to how they wanted to depict “youth” and the intense relationships within. It is for the viewer to decide if there is anything more than friendship being depicted; the language itself is ambiguous.

These works also point to the period of transition that queerness in Japan is in. When *Free!* was released in 2013, the LGBT Boom was just beginning – explicit representation in equivalent sports anime was rare at best. *Sound! Euphonium*'s first novel was released the same year, with the anime following in 2015. Developments over the years only add to the queer readings of these series. In 2016, the ice-skating anime *Yuri!!! On Ice* provided one of the first major examples of a sports anime featuring a same-sex couple. *Free!*'s first director, Utsumi Hiroko, left Animation Do to work on *Banana Fish*,

an explicitly queer anime. With this context, one is left to wonder if Utsumi also included queer theming in *Free!* as well? Kyoto Animation itself released an adaptation of the light novel series *Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid* (2017–2021), which features a female/female couple. Moreover, as the texts of Kyoto Animation age they become framed within an ever-queerer media context, one that continues to transform the way that they are read and how these works are understood by the audience. The way that these works signify meaning to the consumer also continues to shift.

Ultimately, looking at the texts of Kyoto Animation through the lens of signification highlights the way that queerness is represented in the Japanese media, as something that is constantly present as a valid reading of the text, but never the only one. Both queer and cisheteronormative readings of the language are signified by the language and imagery of the texts, with the creatives in interviews and the marketing of the series never firmly coming down on any single ‘correct’ one. Instead, it is left to the viewer to interpret the relationships between the characters and the feelings behind them. To one viewer, *Free!* and *Sound! Euphonium* are queer narratives, while to another, they are youthful sports manga, driven by intense friendships aiming for victory. Both readings are actively encouraged by the work. The existence of both readings then becomes a central part of these series’ identity for audiences, influencing how they consume and discuss them. However, how these readings are interacted with by fandom are closely linked to the context, the spaces, in which they are consumed in. The next chapter turns to these spaces, online through X/Twitter and offline through Ikebukuro and Sendai in which fans consume and transform texts, focusing on how queerness is regulated in these spaces.

## 5. Regulation: Online and Offline Space

In September 2017, I had recently become fascinated with the main fan community for Boys Love (BL) media in Japan, known as *fujoshi* (rotten girls). Having just arrived in Japan for my year abroad that month, I took the chance to go out to the sacred land (*seichi*) of the *fujoshi* - Ikebukuro in northwest Tokyo. Since the 1980s Ikebukuro has seen the development of many commercial outlets catering to anime and manga fan cultures. At the core of this is *Otome* Road, literally “maiden’s road”, an area a ten-minute walk from the eastern side of Ikebukuro station that has a large collection of stores targeting female fans.

In 2017, having read multiple articles explaining that this road was located adjacent to a large popular goods store called Animate, I traipsed around Ikebukuro looking for it. As if to confirm I had eventually stumbled on the correct place, on the outside of the store was a large banner with an advertisement for the BL magazine *Emerald*. The building looked different to the photos I had seen, but I simply assumed that they had remodelled the store since then. Around me were a collection of other stores that also advertised themselves as selling various goods for female consumers as well. The area itself was in the heart of the Eastern Ikebukuro region, surrounding by a variety of other businesses and bustling streets full of people. Lacking much else to suggest otherwise (and bored of walking around lost), I assumed I had arrived at *Otome* Road and went about my business wandering about the Animate and stores close by.

Two years later, I moved to Tokyo for my master’s program and started living in Ikebukuro. In discussion with my landlady, I spoke about my interests in BL and Ikebukuro, and I relayed my love of *Otome* Road and the area around it – referring to the space surrounding the Animate. At this point she, seemingly rather confused, pointed out that where I was describing was not *Otome* Road. As it turned out, *Otome* Road was located across another major road, five minutes from where I had been going. While still populated by a reasonable number of people, this road was noticeably quieter. The stores themselves were well-stocked and numerous, but when compared with the busy thoroughfare around the Animate store, it did not seem like the much-vaunted fandom mecca.

In the years since, and especially post-pandemic, *Otome* Road seems to be growing ever quieter. Despite much writing since the 2000s by scholars and journalists terming the area as the heartland of the female fan and her queer desires (e.g., Sugiura, 2006b; Ōnishi, 2014; Andlauer, 2018; Ernest dit Alban, 2020), this does not describe *Otome* Road as I have experienced it. Even as a large cosplay event was held in the park opposite *Otome* Road in September 2023, the area itself remained fairly quiet as people congregated in the park and then went to other, busier parts of Ikebukuro. Once a paradise of the *fujoshi* and other female fans, *Otome* Road seemed to me a fading presence.

The queer desires of *fujoshi* and similar fans, and the services that targeted them, have not disappeared from Ikebukuro. Instead, they have largely relocated to the area around the Animate that I found in 2017. These relocated, and new stores, while still catering to primarily female fans, came with a new lexicon. No longer do stores refer to themselves explicitly as for “*otome*,” a term used to refer to female fans that is closely connected to the genre of the same name (Andlauer, 2018, p. 167), but at most as “for women” (*josei muke*). The Animate expanded in March 2023 and now has a theatre and two exhibit spaces; it markets itself as the “largest anime and manga store in the world” (Animate, 2024). In October of 2023, Anime Tokyo Station opened nearby, as an exhibit space for the anime industry that heavily targets inbound tourism, funded by the Tokyo city government (Matsuda, 2023). Ikebukuro is undergoing a shift as producers of cultural products, retail stores and governmental forces seek to co-opt the space for their own purposes, redefining its relationship with both the popular media and the queer fantasies of the fans there.

Ikebukuro is one example of how space facilitates consumers, producers, and other connected parties to a given piece of media to interact with and transform a given work. These spaces are socially constituted by the actions of individuals and collectives who “develop, give expression to themselves and encounter prohibitions” through it (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 33–34). From a Circuit of Culture perspective, we can look at how space is constituted as the result of the interactions between the five main processes and the cultural meanings that they articulate surrounding it. These spaces can both be physical, like Ikebukuro and *Otome* Road, or digital, on platforms such as X/Twitter. Amidst the ongoing centralisation of the internet into a series of large social media platforms – platformization - ever greater amounts of capital, data and interaction is

concentrated in online space (Hands, 2013, p. 3; Steinberg, 2019, pp. 21–22). Through looking at X/Twitter and Ikebukuro, this chapter considers how fans interact in both online and physical spaces and what this reveals about the representation of queerness in the Japanese media.

To discuss the role of space in the Japanese media, I focus on the regulation process of the Circuit of Culture and how what constitutes appropriate behaviour in communities surrounding queer media is defined. In the Circuit of Culture model, regulation is the result of the constantly shifting relationships between a variety of groups - from consumers to producers to governmental forces (Thompson, 1997a, p. 3, 1997b, pp. 14–15). While regulation can be the result of legal restrictions such as the obscenity clause of the Japanese penal code or restrictions by event organisers on appropriate ways to dress and places to cosplay (Cather, 2012; King, 2019a), this chapter argues that the constraining of meanings is oftentimes just as much result of how fans themselves police spaces. I explore regulation through queer fandom norms, normative behaviours enforced by fans of media focused on depictions of non-normative sexuality and gender, drawing from Fielding's (2020) concept of queernormativity. Just as queerness can be restricted by how it relates with cisheteronormativity, consumers can also regulate representations themselves. Oftentimes, this involves the policing of how access to certain depictions is obtained and the discourses with which they are associated. Spaces organised around queerness or queer desires are not necessary counter-normative (Oswin, 2008), they can often create their own norms, or repeat cisheteronorms. The policing of space by consumers is then reflected in the way that production creates and designs its works. Regulation is a process influenced by how fans interact with and construct space, and how this feeds back into the work of producers; together this highlights the roles of consumptive norms to depictions of queerness in the Japanese media.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. Firstly, I will outline the main framework through which I approach this chapter: the media mix and the 'female' fandom of queer media forms. From this, I will turn to look at how norms are constructed in online fandom through looking at X/Twitter fans of the series *Hypnosis Mic* and their debates surrounding how sexual imagery should be displayed. From this, I argue that queer depictions in these online spaces are regulated around norms between fans of queer media and how they understand correct "etiquette," enforced through a fear of production

intervening in and stopping their activities. I then turn to physical spaces by looking at Ikebukuro, the history of fan activity in the region and the role of the local municipality and corporations in shaping its geography. My analysis draws on both texts produced by corporate and municipal forces in the region, and fieldwork performed over the course of eight trips to Tokyo between September 2022 and 2023. Fan activity in Ikebukuro is closely linked to and guided by producers who seek to turn the region into a general hub for all anime and manga fans, but this has not stopped or resulted in significant changes to how queer desires play out on-the-ground. Finally, I turn to Sendai, highlighting how access to physical space for queer media consumption and fandom is heavily concentrated in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, making it difficult for those outside of major cities. I argue that these spaces also reflect what appears to a greater focus on female consumers and their queer fantasies as a driver of consumption of the media in Japan.

### **The Media Mix in Japan**

Japan's media mix marketing techniques are key drivers of the interaction between media texts and corporations, physical and online spaces and fan behaviour. A media mix is the marketing of a series or franchise across a variety of formats, mediums and platforms. For example, there may be an original manga that receives an anime adaptation, spin-off novels, keychains with characters on them and in-person events. Within the media mix, the original text is decentred and becomes just one part of the wider network of products and media surrounding a franchise (Azuma, 2001; Steinberg, 2012, pp. 160–161). Instead, the focus of consumption becomes the world of the franchise and the characters that exist within it. Ōtsuka (2003, 2021) refers to the focus of consumption in the media mix as the “worldview” (*sekaikan*) of a franchise, or the world as the characters see it. Each paratext - the works, texts and goods surrounding a franchise (Gray, 2010) - provides the consumer with access to a new facet of that world, a new way to connect with the worldview of a franchise. These paratexts also need not be limited entirely to officially produced works, but can also extend into material produced by fans (Hemmann, 2015; Ōtsuka, 2017; Ernest dit Alban, 2020). In doing so, consumers extend their relationship with the world of a franchise and the characters within.

Ōtsuka focuses heavily on the consumption of narratives but does not provide as much perspective on the main mediators between the world and the consumer – the characters of the franchise (Condry, 2011). Azuma (2001, pp. 52, 66–67) provides a more

character driven approach by arguing that fans consume from a “database,” of “*moe* elements” (*moe yōsō*). *Moe* (literally translating to a flourishing) typically refers to an affective reaction to fictional characters, with the “elements” in question being what causes this reaction in consumers (Azuma, 2001, pp. 52–53; Galbraith, 2019, p. 82). A character can be thus broken down into the *moe* elements that constitute it such as what they are wearing (for example a maid outfit), their physical characteristics (they could have cat ears) or the way that their voice sounds (Azuma, 2001; Galbraith, 2019). Consumption in the media mix centres on “character *moe*” (*kyara moe*) and the affect available through the characters rather than narrative (Azuma, 2001, p. 58). Thus, consumers frame their relationship with a franchise not through narrative, but through their affective relationships with characters who correspond to consumer preferences.

Azuma’s approach does not however provide much explanation as to what the purpose of seeking *moe* is, only describing the consumptive activities of the otaku through the database model (Condry, 2011, pp. 214–216). While there are numerous explanations for the significance of *moe* to consumers (see Galbraith, 2019, chap. 3), this chapter and the next focuses primarily on how consumption focused on *moe* can enable alternative forms of “love” (Condry, 2011). This alternative form of love is oriented towards 2D characters, enabled both by marketing and fan works, that provides fans with endless paratexts that allow them to fantasise about these characters romantically and sexually (Galbraith, 2019, pp. 111–112). Moreover, this “love” does not necessarily need to be theorised as exclusively between the character and the consumer – in creating same-sex couplings a fan also derives *moe* from the “love” between the characters (Galbraith, 2011). For example, in the corpus of tweets for *Yowamushi Pedal*, there is an account that posts pictures of themselves with their favourite coupling of characters from the series almost everywhere they go, using official merchandise as stand-ins for the characters. As will be seen in this chapter and the next, the love of fans can take numerous forms, from often-erotic fan made manga known as *dōjinshi* to creating bags filled with goods for your favourite character. A desire for “love,” imagined with or between fictional characters, is central to why fans consume media mixes.

Furthermore, to discuss the media mix and the “love” that it enables, Azuma and Ōtsuka’s approaches can be brought together. Azuma’s perspective provides a framework for understanding the design of products, how characters are adapted into the media mix

and the related link between production and consumption. Ōtsuka's perspective is helpful for understanding how consumers create narratives from media mixes and how these can connect into fan practices. I argue that what ties both together is the affective potentialities of the media mix and its ability to facilitate queer fantasies either with or between characters. These characters, facilitated by the media mixes that surround the franchise from which they originate, act as the connection between affective desires and queer fantasies of the presumed female fan.

### **Characters and 'Female' Fandom in Japan**

Characters are a ubiquitous sight in Japan, from anime and manga related goods to themed airplane livery to packaging for everyday items such as laundry detergent. Characters themselves are wide ranging in what they represent, they can be either human or non-human, named or unnamed, come from a source text or be representatives of regions (Occhi, 2012, pp. 110–111). These characters are highly adaptable for any number of situations, regardless of whether it entirely matches the logic of the series they originate from. Characters can transform spaces into tools for marketing in the media mix, changing the meanings of these locations for consumer/fans.

Characters enable affective possibilities for those consumers; as Sugawa-Shimada (2021, p. 30) argues, they are “transversive and possess a soul” of their own, allowing fans to attach themselves to these characters in a range of spaces and ways. Facilitating this is how characters are constructed in the Japanese media sphere, which Itō (2005) theorises through the distinction between the *kyarakutā* (the katakana transliteration of character) and the *kyara* (a shortening of character). In this approach, the *kyara* represents the personality and soul of the character, while the *kyarakutā* is the physical/bodily representation of that personality (*jinkaku o motta karada no hyōshō*) (Itō, 2005, pp. 95–97). A stronger *kyara* is more able to transverse, even where the appearance of the *kyarakutā* may differ it is still clearly identifiable as a representation of that *kyara* (Itō, 2005, p. 108). This is central to the media mixing of the character; there is no requirement that the character in commodities always matches the appearance of the *kyarakutā* we see in its original work, if the *kyara* is strong enough to support it. A character with a strong *kyara* can be drawn in radically different art styles, be brought to life in stage plays or placed in situations illogical within the original story's narrative.



The importance of a character having a strong *kyara* that is transverse is well reflected in the fandom cultures that surround characters, and especially in ‘female’ fandom.<sup>34</sup> In particular, I will focus here on two specific groups of female fans: *fujoshi* (and *fudanshi*) and *yumejoshi*. The former, as discussed in the previous chapter, refers to fans of Boys Love (BL) media narratives, works depicting romances between two male characters. Previous studies of *fujoshi* have highlighted their focus on seeking affective reactions, *moe*, from queer readings of the relationships between male characters (Galbraith, 2011, p. 221; Saitō, 2019, p. 114). *Fujoshi* are a recognisable fan group in Japan – in my survey 71.8% of respondents at least recognised the term. This wide recognition is likely important to why, as I will argue over the next two chapters, *fujoshi* are targeted by producers of cultural goods. *Yumejoshi*, translating to dreaming girls, refers instead to fans of sexual and romantic fantasies between themselves and a character. These fans are also often defined by their enjoyment of romance simulation games with a male cast known as *otome* games (Giard, 2024, p. 16), though not all *yumejoshi* play these games. These fans are less recognisable to the wider public – just 21.07% knew of them in my survey – but much like *fujoshi* these fans play an important role in the wider media sphere. Fan fantasies, even where they may be heterosexual in desire reflect a queer affective fantasy, one that seeks to turn away from cisheteronormative reality towards fictional worlds for love/romance. In both cases, these queer affective fantasies are centred on the transverse potential of the characters and their role as a part of the wider affective economy they form a part of.

### **Affective Economies, *Oshikatsu* and Regulation**

Key to the consumption of queer fantasies about characters is the role of affective economics in shaping media marketing in Japan. Affective economics is an approach focused on the emotions that drive consumers, and how companies can exploit them (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 61–62). In the context of the media mix, this is the designing of spaces and merchandise that help to facilitate the fantasies of the consumer base. In Jenkins’ (2006, pp. 62–63) model this is a vicious circle. To be noticed by producers and receive

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<sup>34</sup> While in my fieldwork most consumers in spaces connected to these fandoms, such as Ikebukuro, visibly presented as female, there was always a visible male minority. I observed male consumers shopping in the BL sections of stores, going to cafes traditionally associated with female fandom and participating in female activities more broadly.

targeted representation means the commodification and mass production of what you love. While not denying the exploitative nature of the media mix in how it monetises affect, I contend that this is not as one-sided as it seems.

How the media mix is structured and the types of goods popular within it is closely linked to the activities of fans and the current lexicons used by them. For example, in fandoms associated with female consumers, many franchises monetise the ideal of the *oshi*, or the character/idol that you support. *Oshi* is similar to the word ‘stan,’ a term that has emerged in English language fandom to describe passionate fans. Activities surrounding one’s *oshi* are referred to as *oshikatsu*, literally *oshi* activities, and are greatly varied in how they may be undertaken.<sup>35</sup> This can range from buying huge amounts of goods and displaying them in votive shrines (*kamidana*) and going on ‘dates’ with your *oshi*, to simple public expressions of fandom, such as discouraging negative comments on social media (Yoshimitsu, 2021). A fan may also have many *oshi*, as *oshi kapu/CP* (a shortening of couple), favoured pairings of characters, or *hako oshi*, literally box stans, who support a group of characters or artists (Sugawa-Shimada, 2021, p. 128). *Oshi* act as vectors for the creation of fantasies surrounding characters and the affective reactions of the consumers.

Central to the connection between *oshikatsu*, affect and queerness is that while *oshikatsu* may occur in spaces that are commercial, consumers do not feel exploited or controlled. Instead, they actively feel like they are supporting and enabling their *oshi*, and their relationship with them, through entering these spaces. By going to these spaces, they perform “immaterial work,” labour surrounding communication, affect and the spreading of information surrounding a product (Negri, 1999; Kam, 2013, p. 162; Galbraith, 2019, p. 189). These consumers build familiarity with the characters in these spaces which they use to further push them and form relationships that cross the boundary between 2D and 3D. To do so however, they must consume within areas dominated by corporate interests that push them to spend ever greater amounts of time and capital within these spaces to get greater access to the affective possibilities they hold.

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<sup>35</sup> There is whole subsection of more specific “activities” in Japanese fandom whose names are formed by attaching the kanji character *katsu* (activity) to another term. For example, *yumejoshi* perform *yumekatsu*, and activities with character plushies (*nuigurumi*) are known as *nuikatsu*.

The connection between immaterial work and affect has been discussed in fan spaces in Japan with relation to maid cafés, spaces where customers are served by and interact with female staff who take on the role of maids. In these settings the maids facilitate *moe* reactions and the appeal of the café space is the affect that going to it can provide (Galbraith, 2019, p. 190). Customers see the maids not just as servers, but as characters who bridge the 2D and 3D worlds and can be a vector for romantic affect towards the character of the maid (Galbraith, 2019, p. 206). The value of the maid's labour is thus in how they facilitate affective possibilities. The spaces then encourage repeat visits by tying affect to expenditure. More visits mean more chances to meet your favourite maid, who may now remember you, or benefits such as higher membership tiers that allow additional chances for affective encounters. At the same time, consumers are not passive, and the maid café relies on the active participation of a willing consumer base that does not necessarily see themselves as being exploited for financial gain. As Galbraith's (2011, p. 113) informants in his study of the maid café themselves stated, the space is a place that they feel they "belong," and are part of a "circle" that forms around the maid with which they hold an affective relationship. The affective relationship between the maid and the consumer may be in a space controlled by the capitalistic aims that constitute it, but they also provide a place to escape the expectations of cisheteronormative society and seek forms of affect that queer the norms of romance and sexuality.

A representative example of an *oshikatsu* that shows how affect towards characters is visible in female fan spaces, such as Ikebukuro, are *ita* bags (Figure 5.1) (lit. painful bag). The name is a self-deprecatory joke about how it is painful (*itamashii*) to be seen publicly wearing them, and perhaps a wry comment on how painful on the wallet the bags are to make. *Ita* bags have a see-through plastic outer sleeve into which pieces of merchandise featuring one's *oshi* (or *oshi kapu*) are placed, oftentimes being filled with multiples of the same item. This necessitates either buying a significant amount of new randomised goods, or targeting the exact ones you want second-hand, potentially at a mark-up if the character is popular. Additionally, wearing *ita* bags can be a way of forming community in spaces such as Ikebukuro through making conversations with others who have matching *oshi* (Giard, 2024, p. 23). These fans through their creative displays of their *oshi* in these bags both participate in the media mix practices of the

franchise and perform a form of immaterial labour, displaying and spreading the image of the target of their affect to those around them. *Ita* bags are a very public marker of both the characters that are central to the affective fantasies of the consumer wearing it, and a marker of the desires that underpin it.



Figure 5.1: An example of an *ita* bag. Source: (Shirasu, 2024).

At the same time, there is regulation of *oshikatsu*, oftentimes by fans themselves. A search online will quickly reveal numerous discussions on sites like Yahoo! Chiebukuro, a large Japanese-language question and answer site, or various fan blogs on when and where *oshikatsu*, including *ita* bags, are appropriate. Such sites stress the importance of following general rules of “etiquette” (*manā*) to not create a nuisance (*meiwaku*) through *oshikatsu* (e.g. Tenchō, 2023; *Kōkōsei Shimbun*, 2023; Rinko, 2024). Strict rules of etiquette are common in fan spaces in Japan where great importance is placed on preventing *meiwaku* (Nakajima *et al.*, 2016). In cosplay spaces at events in Japan, for example, cosplayers are often subject to strict rules that aim to not cause *meiwaku* for other attendees (Hoff, 2012, p. 162; King, 2019a, pp. 282–283). For *ita* bags, this is frequently focused on understanding the barrier between types of space; it is a “nuisance” to wear an *ita* bag or have it showing in public transportation but okay to do so in places such as Ikebukuro (e.g., Yahoo! Chiebukuro, 2022; Tenchō, 2023). Giard (2024, p. 25) also describes in her research on *yumejoshi* how fans would cover-up their *ita* bags, revealing them as they approached Ikebukuro station on public transport, having now entered a space where it was appropriate to publicly display their affect towards their *oshi*. The *ita* bags, and the affective desires towards the characters they display, must be

worn and displayed with a sensitivity to the location. The display of these bags, and other similar *oshikatsu*, are regulated to certain times and places not by legal, or corporate forces, but by fans themselves and “etiquette.” Thus emerges the need for a space that can be associated with *oshikatsu*, the queer desires that underpin them and within which such desires are less regulated, whether by fandom norms or producers. This chapter turns to look at two such spaces in the Japanese media sphere – X/Twitter fandom and Ikebukuro.

### **Online Space – Affordances and Fandom**

The proliferation of online platforms has widened access to online media fandoms and the possibilities therein. Fans are less limited by geographical location – if there is no one around you interested in the same thing then you may be able to connect online. This connection can be cross-national; there is no requirement that you are based in the same country or even speak the same language; a shared love of a single series or character can be enough to form connections (Morimoto, 2019; Jaworowicz-Zimny, 2023). As mentioned in the previous chapter, online fandom can act as a “contact zone,” where the communities formed are not always related to nation, race, language etc., but also by a shared love of a piece of media (Pratt, 1991; Morimoto, 2019, p. 137). Online platforms provide a space for the expansion of fandom and the possibility of fans to form meaningful connections without location-based or significant monetary restrictions. At the same time, these fandoms are limited both by the design of the platforms they use and how fans perceive the regulatory and algorithmic frameworks a platform runs on.

The possibilities of online fandom are closely linked to the platforms they are on, the affordances - what technologies allow us to do - they have and how these affordances are used by fans to connect and interact (Bucher and Helmond, 2017, pp. 234, 240). An affordance of X/Twitter may be hashtags, short phrases connected to a ‘#’ that designates the topic of a tweet, or the communities that it is intended to be seen by. Equally, affordances are not always used by or understood by users in the intended way; consumers are often unaware of the workings of the technical infrastructure of a platform or exactly how its algorithms work to shape how a user interacts with affordances (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p. 3; Bucher and Helmond, 2017, pp. 237–241; Shaw, 2017, p. 597). Emojis can be included in usernames and are frequently used to indicate a person’s social or political

identity, or even indicate the preferred couplings of a fan for a text. How affordances are understood shapes how fans interact with each other.

Affordances are central to fan activities, and this is visible in the Japanese fandoms that I analysed for this thesis. On X/Twitter, Japanese-language fandoms are typically referred to as a *kurasutā* (cluster) or *kaiwai* (vicinity) (Giard, 2024), and hashtags play a central role in connecting fans online. In my X/Twitter corpus of tweets about the high school road cycling series *Yowamushi Pedal*, for example, cluster was especially common in hashtags structured in the format #I want to connect with people in the [series name] cluster ([series name] *kurasutā-san to tsunagaritai*). The most common hashtag in my corpus, other than the series name *Yowamushi Pedal*, was “#I will follow back everyone who RTs (retweets).” As these hashtags are a commonly used format (e.g., Yahoo! Chiebukuro, 2014a; Donauts, 2024), it is likelier either that someone may intentionally search for some variation of them or that tweets including the phrase trend. The second hashtag includes an invitation to retweet - repost the tweet on your own X/Twitter feed - which makes use of another affordance of the platform to further drive engagement that may cause the tweet to appear on even more timelines. Fans make use of affordances on platforms to further connect with others in a cluster, forming greater connections that can link someone into a fandom they may not have access to due to location or monetary restrictions.

While affordances can be used to increase visibility and form connections, they can also be used to regulate fan activity. To highlight this, I provide an example from the fandom of *Hypnosis Mic*, a popular rap-idol series that features a primarily male cast who have close, but never explicitly homoerotic interactions. The series originated primarily on CDs in 2017, before expanding into manga, an anime, a mobile app and a whole manner of other goods. Much like *Free!* in the previous chapter, it is popular with *fujoshi* – the tag for BL of the series on popular Japanese art social media site Pixiv has 92,004 works posted as of August 2024 (*#Hifumai*, no date). *Hypnosis Mic* has a well-developed media mix, and a large *fujoshi* fandom online that is heavily focused on creating couplings using the characters, with the creation and dissemination of fan-created BL a major form of *oshikatsu*. Its online fandom thus makes a useful case study for looking at how the spaces in which fandom activity occurs and how this are regulated shapes engagements with queer media.

A central issue in *Hypnosis Mic*'s online BL fandom is their relationship with license holders, referred to as *kōshiki* (lit. official). Japan's strict copyright laws mean that fan made works are potentially illegal and companies have previously taken legal action against them, most notably against Pokémon *dōjinshi* in the late 1990s (Yonezawa, 2001, p. 8; Mehra, 2002, p. 34; He, 2014). As fan works can form one part of the media mix (Ernest dit Alban, 2020), the rare occasions corporations actively intervene serve as an indicator as to what is considered inappropriate to be associated with a text. To avoid such intervention, producers will often include a set of guidelines for the usage of their work for things such as *dōjinshi* (e.g., Happy Elements, 2021; Bandai-Namco Online Idolish7 Management Team, 2023). Such guidelines exist for *Hypnosis Mic* and appear to have first been posted in 2020 (King Record Co., 2020, 2024). The most clear restrictions are that fans are prohibited from profiting from fan works and the license holders also forbid making physical merchandise of the characters (King Record Co., 2024).<sup>36</sup> The license holders' guidance also covers a wider range of possible contraventions of their rights, stipulating that "even if a fan activity that follows these guidelines, expressions that may harm the image of the product or public morals are forbidden." What "public morals" are, and what causing "harm" to the brand signifies is left unstated. Instead, fans themselves are forced to speculate and self-regulate around their interpretation of this statement. As I show in this chapter, how *Hypnosis Mic* fans police their *oshikatsu* is revealing of the connections between regulation, queer representation in Japan and online space.

### **Self-Regulation in *Hypnosis Mic* BL Fandom: Etiquette and Moral Panics**

Fans of *Hypnosis Mic* BL have made use of platforms and their affordances to hide their activity and regulate the way the fandom exists out of a concern for falling afoul of these guidelines. These norms amongst fans of queer media are similar for most works, though are broadly left unspoken.<sup>37</sup> Unspoken rules of etiquette as to how to engage with queer works based on a series help prevent "normal" (*tsūjō*) searches about *Hypnosis Mic* displaying material that may contravene the guidance (dohatsu, 2021). In short, the aim

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<sup>36</sup> While there are accounts suggesting there was a previous set of guidelines in which making physical goods were allowed (suchomochlus, 2021), the guidelines page only appears on the site in October 2020 and includes the prohibition on making physical goods (Hipumai matome dibijon, 2020; King Record Co., 2020).

<sup>37</sup> The most common places to find explanations are on Q&A site Yahoo! Chiebukuro and note, a popular Japanese blogging site.

is to limit exposure through self-regulation. There are no clear boundaries online as to how far a given tweet or post may spread (Payne, 2008, p. 33), so best efforts must be taken to control who sees fan activity. Additionally, BL fans often feel the need to hide their queer fantasies from others. As Satō and Ishida's (2022, p. 5) survey about BL found, 63.4% of BL readers felt they should hide their enjoyment of the genre, and amongst all women surveyed 74.9% thought same-sex romance was a “forbidden love” (*kindan no ai*). These beliefs surrounding fan activity does not necessarily seem to be rooted in a belief that same-sex romance must be hidden. In my survey, a t-test comparing fans of BL and non-fans showed the former group were far more likely ( $p < 0.01$ ) to see it as okay to show same-sex kisses in shows viewable by children (full table in Appendix C). Instead, fan behaviour is arguably rooted in the maintenance of fandom etiquette and attempts to hide from the eyes of media producers. When a homoerotic image is posted without restriction someone “normal” may find their art and then report it, causing the producers to actively regulate or shut down fan activity.

There are several methods used by fans to hide BL content about *Hypnosis Mic* on X/Twitter, which range from using emojis to indicate couplings to placing a blurred ‘not safe for work’ (NSFW) filter on an image to making their accounts private (needing followers to be approved) (suchomochlus, 2021). Through making BL content surrounding *Hypnosis Mic* harder to access, the chance it will be seen by the producers and people seeking “normal” content is lowered. Yet, the reality of X/Twitter makes it near impossible to prevent people from stumbling across BL or other queer fantasies for the series on a “normal” search. As an example, in August 2024 I did a test search on X/Twitter using the shorthand for the series, *Hipumai*. The third post shown was from an account that had recently reposted a tweet by a BL account that posts explicit imagery, taking just two clicks to get to. A little further down was a tweet from a *fudanshi* that listed all his BL couplings as emoji in his biography, technically illegible to a “normal” consumer but easily checked with a google search (or browse of the profile). These two accounts had used the shortened name for the series - ‘Hipumai’ – either in a tweet or in their username, causing their accounts to get picked up in a search. As I argue below, it is impossible to completely hide BL content on public accounts – a minor mistake can render fandom self-regulation in vain. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, *fujoshi* were highly recognised in my survey – as a group their interests and fan activities



are already visible in wider society. The only way to completely hide an account to make it private and approve every follower individually, but this then makes it hard to connect with other fans. While fans may seek to regulate their activity and the visibility of queer desires, the available measures may only have a limited effect. In 2021, (mis)understandings around the affordances and algorithm of X/Twitter and the vaguely worded official guidelines would collide in a debate surrounding self-regulation of an account posting pornographic fan art.

In July 2020, an account was started on Twitter that posted as one of the characters from *Hypnosis Mic*, Doppo, and would eventually garner over 19,000 followers. The in-character posts featured nude art and, as the narrative of the account progressed, would eventually involve Doppo getting together with another character, Hifumi, who also had a similar account created by the artist behind this (suchomochlus, 2021). The account lacked a biography, the profile image was a zoom-in of Doppo's upper body and no characters were mentioned by name – the account was well-hidden. However, the open display of sexual imagery, combined with the large following the account would garner, drew negative attention for potentially violating “public morals.” As a result, the fandom collectively acted to regulate the account by correcting the behaviour of the offending party (Gonzalez, 2016). *Hypnosis Mic* BL fandom, as a grouping focused on desires that are considered non-normative, sought to protect their niche online by placing moral boundaries around proper queer expression.<sup>38</sup> This account became what Cohen (2011, p. 2) describes as a folk devil, a person (or group) that represents deviant desires or actions that must be stopped for the safety of others and upholding of proper morals. The ensuing moral panic over this account posing a threat to the stability of *Hypnosis Mic* BL fandom and harming minors is a helpful case study to discuss the regulation of queer representation and the issues with online spaces – particularly social media – for consuming queer media.

In moral panics, minors are a frequent discursive tool for stoking fear as a group that is particularly vulnerable to immoral depictions as they may repeat behaviour they see in pornographic imagery or have their growth harmed by it (Cather, 2012, pp. 262–

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<sup>38</sup> This may be similar to the banning of kink at Pride parades as an attempt to blend into normative society by excising elements that may be a threat to being seen as such (Greenberg, 2023, pp. 5–6), potentially due to the perceived harm of seeing such depictions to ‘normal’ people.

264; Tsaliki, 2015, pp. 504–505). As was discussed in chapter three, such arguments have been used to regulate pornographic imagery, including BL, within Japan previously (see Cather, 2012; Hori, 2015). In the panic within *Hypnosis Mic* BL fandom, the figure of the minor played a central role, becoming one of the dominant explanations for the moral transgressions of the accounts. For some users, minors were a group “unable to handle rottenness (*fu*)” so should be kept away from any chance of seeing queer erotica. For others it was about ensuring the “rights” of minors to “safely” (*anzen ni*) spend their time online. For one user, posting about the situation to English audiences, the account had the potential to cause “sexual harm” through its existence. As proof of the harm being done by the account’s lack of precautions, some fans then claimed that (by unclear means) that it was provable that minors had seen the homoerotic images posted (Figure 5.2). The account’s lack of precautions was treated as a potential danger to those under 18, who are presumed to be harmed by seeing explicit queer pornography. Thus, the account risked harming public morals and as a result falling afoul of the content guidelines for *Hypnosis Mic*, necessitating regulation by the fans.

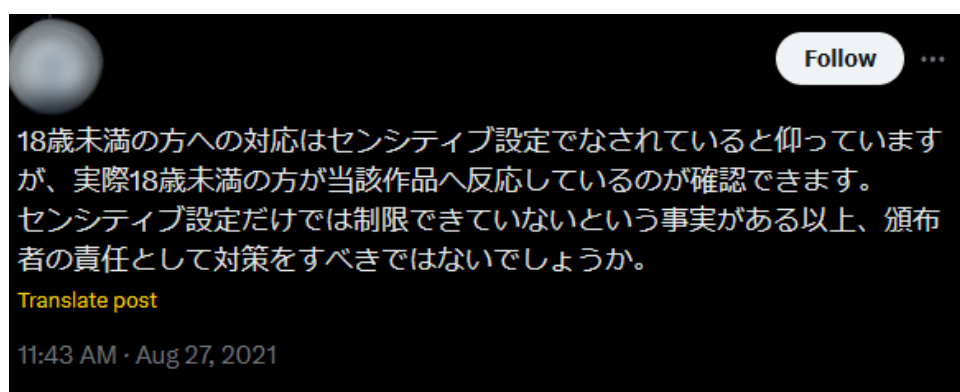


Figure 5.2: An example of a tweet claiming that it could be verified that minors had seen the account at the centre of the controversy.

However, in focusing on this account as a potential issue, this served the effect of further elevating the prominence of it and spreading the panic further. Thus, fans were constantly exhorted by various users on X/Twitter and in summaries of the drama on other sites to block and report the account to Twitter (one going so far as to suggest reporting the account to the police) and not tag it in tweets (e.g., dohatsu, 2021; okura, 2021). However, to prevent the ‘moral impropriety’ of this account from spreading, people needed to be informed, and discussion spread. The panic then spread across linguistic

groups. As the situation would be “difficult to understand” for “overseas” fans who may not understand the issue (dohatsu, 2021), translations emerged and so the furore spread further.

These English language accounts then added further interpretations of the account, several of which furthered erroneous readings. One user attempted to “clear things up” on behalf of their Japanese friends by explaining how the account was breaking the law (Travoltacustom, 2021). This user incorrectly claimed that the Japanese penal code states that “genitals must be censored in pornography” - the relevant article, number 175, only forbids the creation and distribution of *waisetsu* (obscene) materials without specifics (Keihō, 1907). While there are certain assumptions as to what may constitute obscene material – such as uncensored genitalia – as was briefly discussed in chapter one, what exactly is considered obscene is unclear (Sonoda and Dai, 2016, pp. 5–6). Even uncensored genitalia may not be considered obscene in certain circumstances, such as at festivals where large phalluses are publicly displayed (McKnight, 2017, pp. 255–256). Regardless, genitalia were never shown uncovered in the homoerotic art posted by the account at the centre of the controversy. As Payne (2008) argues, the virtual world has no knowable boundaries and thus it is impossible to know where a discourse or text will spread to and who will see it. The online world facilitated and propagated the moral panic and then led to it leaving its original context – causing the situation to worsen as new actors entered with their own ideals and understandings. Thus, the panic kept spiralling and more attention was drawn to it because involved parties kept engaging in discussion about it, rather than just ignoring or blocking the account. While online space can facilitate connections, it can also quickly spread panic across different groups rapidly.

The issues outlined here are intertwined with how the user at the centre of this saw much of the panic as being a result of the fandom norms that regulated behaviour in the community – norms that they did not agree with. As one writer who was active against the account put it, they broke “etiquette” surrounding fan works (dohatsu, 2021). The owner of the account indicated as much in their response to the drama, arguing there was a “crusade” (*shūkyō sensō*) in female fandom of fan works against accounts that openly display BL sexual imagery. For her, the issue was different standards being applied to women’s queer fantasies, which are treated as uniquely in need of hiding from others, while male sexual fantasies about women are displayed openly online. Responses to her

simply reiterated that the issue was that minors could see the content without addressing that this would also be true of a significant number of heterosexual pornographic images available online that they did not take issue with. The account did not clearly break any guidelines or laws, so neither X/Twitter nor the company initially stepped in to regulate it themselves. However, she had become a folk devil, a symbol of how a fan should not act and an example of poor morality that was threatening the queer fantasies of other fans (Cohen, 2011, p. 2). Her openly displayed “improper” queer desires threatened the online space of the wider *Hypnosis Mic* BL community and therefore needed to be stopped.

The end of this panic came in September 2021 over two stages: the arrival of a bad actor and finally intervention by production. First a troll started tagging and sending the controversial account’s pornographic works to official groups and voice actors fuelling a further escalation as the troll directly sought to involve production.<sup>39</sup> Soon after, the official guidelines were updated including a sentence in the section on the display of fan works that “it is forbidden to publicise works with sexual expressions, or expression that may discomfort others, in a way that may be viewed by minors” (King Record Co., 2021). In other words – accounts posting pornographic imagery should be private or feature some level of protection, codifying the fandom norms into the official guidelines. While it is unclear whether the producers of *Hypnosis Mic* ever intervened according to this guideline, numerous BL-themed accounts were private or deleted by their owners (suchomochlus, 2021). Regulation from producers seemed to be a response to a fandom trying and failing to regulate itself around fandom norms and a vaguely worded guideline about morals.<sup>40</sup> Online spaces amplified the panic around the controversial account as more users felt their space for queer fantasy was under threat. Queer representations came under greater regulation in *Hypnosis Mic* BL fandom because the affordances, algorithms and cultures of the platforms online made fandom norms impossible to maintain.

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<sup>39</sup> The next chapter will feature a greater discussion of the relationship between producers and consumers, but it is unlikely that production was not aware of queer fandom activity – merchandise in the media mix of *Hypnosis Mic* often references popular couplings. Thus, it seems unlikely that this single account would have triggered a uniquely negative response by production without the fandom panic.

<sup>40</sup> The incorporation of expectations of etiquette from the fans into the official guidelines mirrors what is seen in other areas of Japanese society – for example Schimkowsky (2022) highlights how train companies operate campaigns over proper transportation etiquette in response to what they perceive as the main concerns of consumers.

Perhaps in reflection of how this guideline emerged in response to this panic, the added rule eventually disappeared from the guidelines in 2024 to no fanfare (King Record Co., 2024). Online spaces may have enabled a greater level of fan interaction than before, but it also means that community maintenance and regulation of fandom expression is more difficult. The *Hypnosis Mic* controversy is one example of this – many of the norms outlined in this section are true of other BL fandoms. Regulation within online spaces, often based around fandom norms, limits the potential of social media for queer *oshikatsu*. Thus, for many fans, there is a need for spaces that are freed from the issues surrounding online platforms, are more limited in scope and can act as an acceptable space for the queer fantasies of fans. For queer media fantasies East Ikebukuro provides one such space.

### **Ikebukuro: A Brief History**

Ikebukuro is a region in north-west Tokyo that as a “borderland,” both as an area on the fringes of central Tokyo – the first stop in and out of the city for many commuters – and as a “frontier” for new possibilities in its heterotopic landscape (Coates, 2018). The area now referred to as Ikebukuro emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a transportation hub in Tokyo, bisected by trainlines that ran, and continue to run through, the region (Tamekuni and Hanzawa, 1994; Coates, 2018). With the development of rail links came the movement of people into the region, which became a hub for cheaper wooden housing that had largely survived the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake (Coates, 2018; Wong, 2023). The region developed both as an intellectual and consumer hub as well with Rikkyo University opening in 1922, and several shopping centres in the area around the station in the 1930s – which remain a symbol of the region and its attraction to youth audiences and consumers (Coates, 2018). Over the 1920s and 1930s, Ikebukuro was also home to a colourful anti-establishment art scene, known as “Ikebukuro Montparnasse,” though this would not survive the war amidst government regulation (Wong, 2023). Ikebukuro from its beginnings was defined by the diversity found within its borders which included migrants from across Japan and East Asia; an art scene; a university and, particularly important for this thesis, a growing consumer culture centred on department stores.

After the devastation of World War II flattened much of the region, black markets began to emerge in Ikebukuro, many connected the large Chinese migrant community (Coates, 2018; Ernest dit Alban, 2020). These black markets have left a long mark on the cultural memory of Ikebukuro in Japan as a region of “diversity and danger,” even long

after the disappearance of the markets (Coates, 2018). Such an image has been propagated by famous texts such as *Ikebukuro West Gate Park* that heavily drew on associations made between Ikebukuro and ‘danger’ in the popular consciousness. Perhaps in order to reduce the perception of Ikebukuro as dangerous, the local municipality – Toshima ward – has made safety a key theme of its various redevelopment projects in the region (Toshima-ku, 2015; Coates, 2018). Moreover, while there were some attempts to reclaim the narratives surrounding the black markets around 2015 through a series of Toshima-sponsored events (Coates, 2018), these have seemingly been largely abandoned with the websites promoting it long down and connected social media having not posted in several years as of 2024. Instead, the focus seems to have shifted towards promoting a different part of Ikebukuro’s landscape – its appeal to young consumers and artists.

Over the past decade, Toshima has undertaken series of projects seeking to redefine the ward as a hub for “art and culture,” a “cultural fusion city” that bridges between “high culture” and “subcultures” (Toshima-ku, 2015). This project itself partially draws on previous projects by Toshima – such as one from 2012 entitled “A Safe and Secure Cultural City” (*anzen, anshin na bunka toshi Toshima*) (Toshima-ku, 2015, p. 6; Coates, 2018, p. 178). Key to this project has been the reframing of the region as a series of “stages” (*gekijō*), where anyone can become the “main character” (*shuyaku*) (Toshima-ku, 2015). These projects have included the large-scale building of entertainment venues in East Ikebukuro, massive redevelopment of the parks across the region and a major expansion of corporate chains. The redevelopment plans pursued by Toshima fall in-line with wider trends in Tokyo since the 1990s Asian financial crisis of 1999 and the Lehman Shock of 2008. For example, the Lehman shock cut off a segment of a wealthy clientele base for the types of hostess and escort clubs found in regions like Ikebukuro and Roppongi (Cybriwsky, 2011). Alongside this, locally owned businesses – especially eateries – across Tokyo have also struggled to compete with chain stores and either sold-up or gone out of business (Futamura and Sugiyama, 2018). In this same period, municipalities across Tokyo have sought major redevelopments in order to ‘clean up’ the image of their region. Roppongi and Akihabara being two significant examples of regions that have seen significant redevelopment over the last two decades that have marginalised or pushed out long-standing business and cultural practices in these regions (Cybriwsky, 2011; Galbraith, 2019). What we are seeing in Ikebukuro matches trends across Tokyo

that have been influenced by the economic fortunes of the city the financial crises of the 1990s and 2000s.

On paper, Toshima's plans place the diversity of the region at their centre, framing the region as a place where a "main character" can come from anywhere. In practice, these plans have downplayed and marginalised the past connection of the region with black markets and groups associated with less sanguine businesses in favour of promoting the region's historical art scene and its anime and manga fandoms. Moreover, while Chinese-owned businesses saw a period of increase in the late 2000s, local opposition thwarted attempts to brand part of the region as a China-town (Coates, 2018, p. 177). Notably, the current plans pursued by the region make no mention of the large Chinese community, despite the municipality specifically including regional branding as one part of its strategy to market Toshima (Toshima-ku, 2015, p. 48). In contrast to the seeming abandonment of plans to draw on the history of the black markets in the years after 2015, and the lack of public interest in the large Chinese community in the region, Toshima places heavy importance on its history in the arts and cultural spheres. Events drawing on Ikebukuro Montparnasse and promoting its history in the region continue to be held by public and private bodies, for example (Wong, 2023). Importantly for this chapter, Ikebukuro has many businesses and events targeting female fans of anime and manga – especially BL (Ernest dit Alban, 2020). Toshima has sought to promote fandom activity in Ikebukuro and turn the region into an "anime city" (Toshima-ku, 2015) and turn the female fan of anime and manga into a, if not the, symbol of the region. Toshima has thus sought to influence and regulate the activity and flow of fans within the region, especially in the heartland of female fandom within its borders – *Otome Road*.

### **The Emergence of *Otome Road***

In several Japanese cities, there are significant areas ranging from single buildings to almost an entire town that are dedicated to popular culture fandoms, with a large collection of stores and services catering to them. Each of these spaces serve similar, but somewhat varied audiences – for example, Akihabara in Tokyo is heavily associated with male *otaku* and Nipponbashi in Osaka has many card game stores. Ikebukuro is the equivalent prime site for female fans and their queer fantasies. Fans are brought together in these spaces by their shared consumption habits, as well as similar preferences and targets for their desires (Bell and Binnie, 2004, p. 1809; Sugawa-Shimada, 2021, pp. 194–

197). These fandoms shape these geographies through their activities, drawing in businesses and services that cater to them and, as we can see with Toshima's "anime city" plans, can capture the attention of key stakeholders in the media and government (Ernest dit Alban, 2020).

Anime/manga meccas play an important role in the broader media mix as spaces for the distribution of goods, the holding of events and as the base for the creation of media corporations and franchises. Ikebukuro is strongly reflective of this. The largest popular culture goods chain store in Japan, Animate, began in Ikebukuro in 1982 and was followed by manga book stores that served as hubs for selling merchandise for anime and manga, and later *dōjinshi* through second-hand stores (Ernest dit Alban, 2020). Additionally, location specific events are a key part of the media mix; goods sold at certain events and stores may not be released elsewhere. Often the easiest place to find limited time goods outside the initial distribution are these meccas with their large network of second-hand stores (Steinberg and Ernest dit Alban, 2018, pp. 297–298). For example, a major part of *oshikatsu*, discussed in more detail in the next chapter, are cafés themed around anime and manga series known as collab cafés which started to spread after Animate opened one in Ikebukuro in 2012. These spaces can even influence the design of media works themselves. The character designs for *Hypnosis Mic* were done by the Otomate division of Idea Factory, a game developer based in East Ikebukuro, with multiple characters in-series having come from or lived in the region. Anime and manga meccas are not just areas for fans to congregate, they have a large influence over the shape of the industry, what is represented in it and the form that these representations appear in.

Within these anime/manga meccas, regulation also plays an important role. Akihabara, for example, saw major tensions between street performers and cosplayers, and local residents and the police who saw these performances as indecent and disruptive between 2007-2008 (Galbraith, 2019, pp. 152–156). These conflicts led to protests by both local residents against otaku street performances and ones in return by otaku against attempts to regulate their activities (Galbraith, 2019, p. 156). A mass stabbing in Akihabara in June 2008 was the final straw for the municipality, police and other critics, with stricter regulations of fan activities in Akihabara being enforced from then on



(Galbraith, 2019, p. 155).<sup>41</sup> In the years since, street performances remain restricted and parks in the area that that been popular with street performers and cosplayers have been repurposed or paved over (Galbraith, 2019, p. 166). While Akihabara provides space for media fans to gather, it is still regulated to limit certain socially unacceptable behaviours. Ikebukuro, however, has a vastly different regulatory regime that seeks to co-opt the queer desires of fans for city-branding purposes. The result of this is a realm that is controlled by municipal and corporate forces that do not strictly regulate fans and their queer desires.

As briefly mentioned above, anime and manga fandoms in Ikebukuro emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, led by the opening of stores such as Animate and later businesses specialising in the resale of *dōjinshi* and second-hand merchandise (Ernest dit Alban, 2020). In 2000, Animate moved their flagship store to a road about a ten minute walk from the east exit of Ikebukuro station, placing a strong focus on female consumers in its offerings, and soon businesses targeting female fans started to congregate around it (Ernest dit Alban, 2020). This area became known as *Otome Road*, and became the heartland of female fans of BL media and romance simulation games (Galbraith, 2011; Andlauer, 2018; Ernest dit Alban, 2020). By 2005-2006, *Otome Road* became the focus of popular media in magazines such as *Aera* (Sugiura, 2006a), television specials ('Ikebukuro higashiguchi/Otome rōdo', 2006), and major newspapers running news stories on the region (e.g., *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2006; *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2006; Ohara, 2007). This period of coverage followed the contemporaneous emergence of the term *fujoshi* in the early 2000s in similar outlets (Hori and Mori, 2020b, p. 59), and a boom in coverage of male otaku in Akihabara following the success of the popular novel *Densha Otoko* (2003, *Train Man*) – a romance about a virgin male otaku who spends time in Akihabara (Kam, 2013, p. 158). As will be discussed later, *Otome Road* has subsequently seen a decline, however the heavy presence of female fans remains strong in Ikebukuro as the region became the heartland of the female fan and her desires.

The focus of this road is the *otome*, an archaic term for a pure, unmarried maiden (Andlauer, 2018, p. 166). While the term is heavily associated with the *otome* genre of games, typically dating simulators with male 2D characters (Andlauer, 2018, p. 166;

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<sup>41</sup> The perpetrator of this stabbing had no notable connections with the fans in the region, but his actions were treated as a symbolic of the wider issues with Akihabara being transformed into a mecca for otaku - regulation was thus needed to return the region to "normal" (Galbraith, 2019, pp. 155-156).

Ganzon, 2019, p. 348; Giard, 2024), it is also used in the names of general female-fandom focused media. For example, the magazine *Otomedial* – mentioned in the last chapter - is a character-focused magazine targeted at a female audience that focuses both on *yumejoshi* and *fujoshi*. The close connection between queerness and the *otome* is well reflected in coverage of the road in the mid-2000s, which variously uses the terms *otome* and *fujoshi* interchangeably, and refers to fans in the region as having a “sexual love” for 2D characters (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2006; *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2006; Ohara, 2007). *Otome* are defined by their affective desires, how they seek *moe* through “sexual” fantasies with fictional characters – epitomised by the goods, services and fan activities on *Otome Road*. As used in Ikebukuro, the *otome* is a female otaku interested in queer desires surrounding male characters. The queerness of the desires of the so-called *otome* towards the media has shaped how Ikebukuro is understood and represented as a space within popular media.

The *otome* of Ikebukuro play an important role in the arts and culture city plan being pursued by Toshima since the mid-2010s, playing a central role in the attempts turn the region into an “anime city” (Toshima-ku, 2015, pp. 17–18). To do so, Toshima has sought to co-opt and influence the movement of fans in the region, shifting them away from *Otome Road* to an area closer to the station. In the terminology of Toshima’s plans, Ikebukuro provides “stages” for the fans to experience and interact with the world of anime – acting as a 2.5D space that exists between the worlds of reality and fiction (Sugawa-Shimada, 2021). Additionally, while their plans acknowledge the important role of female consumers throughout (Toshima-ku, 2015), the “anime city” framing seeks to distance Ikebukuro from the heavily gendered language of *Otome Road*. In Toshima’s plans, “anime city” Ikebukuro is a region that can appeal to all anime and manga fans, albeit with a significant female presence. From the perspective of regulation, Ikebukuro has significant differences from regions like Akihabara. Toshima and other key stakeholders in the region have not, however, sought to regulate the queer desires of fans in the region through restrictions or interventions as in Akihabara, but rather to instead co-opt them. This has resulted in the presentation of the region with two possible readings: as *otome* Ikebukuro for fans of queer media fantasies and as anime city Ikebukuro, a landmark for all fans of anime and manga.

## **Ikebukuro, Animate and Dual Readings**

Henri Lefebvre argues that space is organised around spatial practice, representations of space or representational space – how a space is understood, created and lived within (1991, pp. 38–39; Nash, 2020, p. 306). In Ikebukuro, central to all three of these has been Animate. The 1982 opening of Animate drew Ikebukuro into anime and manga media mixes and the 2000 flagship opening marked the start of *Otome* Road. Animate’s influence on the organisation of the region has continued to be salient as seen in the shifts amongst businesses and consumers since the flagship relocated closer to the station in 2012. These changes have accelerated in recent years. A comparison of the Animate and Toshima joint-produced map of *otome*-targeted businesses from 2018 to the actual situation in June 2023, when I was conducting fieldwork in Ikebukuro, revealed that just eight of the 21 listed businesses continued to operate unchanged (Animate and Toshima-ku, 2018). Of the remaining thirteen, five were from the same chain (K-Books) and, over this period, each shifted the focus of the types of goods they specialised in. An updated 2024 *otome* map from Toshima still lists 21 businesses, though the only new listed stores are satellite outlets of chains already on *Otome* Road.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, immediately around the Animate flagship the number of businesses increased from seven to eleven, alongside multiple new centres supported by Toshima and a cinema complex with more anime and manga stores nearby (Animate and Toshima-ku, 2024). How Ikebukuro is organised is closely linked to Animate; businesses congregate around the flagship and fans experience the region through venues that are proximate to it.

Reflecting Animate’s influence over the organisation and conception of space in the region, Toshima has sought to work with and enable the flagship store’s development and expansion in the last decade. In March 2023, the Animate flagship further expanded with more floor space, a cinema and an exhibition area, made possible by Toshima selling the land of its former health department building to the company. Toshima saw this sale of land to Animate as one part of transforming Ikebukuro into an “anime city” that could support the “co-existence of main cultures and sub-cultures” (Sōmubu zaisan unyō ka, 2019). Rather than hiding or obfuscating subcultures such as the *otome* fandoms, through

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<sup>42</sup> Specifically, this is a character themed doughnut shop in the former Animate flagship and a new K-Books store replacing the former Lashinbang – a major second-hand retailer that moved next to the Animate flagship in April 2023.

Animate they could further blend them into and support their “coexistence” with the “main cultures” of regular society. Moreover, the greater focus in the business world on queer media amidst the LGBT Boom has potentially also made it more ‘acceptable’ for municipalities such as Toshima to openly target the *otome* and their fantasies. These businesses are not necessarily openly ‘LGBT,’ but their focus *otome* arguably aligns them with the greater interest in consumers of queerness seen in the boom. Animate represented an opportunity to further influence how space is conceived in Ikebukuro, and more broadly the way it is lived by the *otome*. In doing so, Toshima have been able to influence how *otome* fandoms experience and conceive of Ikebukuro and shift where they spend time without directly regulating the activities of the fans as the stakeholders in Akihabara did.

The Animate building itself is heavily designed around facilitating the coexistence of both general anime and manga fans and those of queer manga genres such as BL. For general fans, Animate markets itself as the “largest anime shop in the world,” a one-stop shop for all the anime (and manga) merchandise one could ever want (Animate, 2024). Outside the building is a screen which plays a variety of promotional videos, both for the company and the ward – one of these features an advertisement for the region as a “sensational anime and digital destination” (Figure 5.3). Animate actively seeks to present itself as a spot for all anime and manga fans and ties itself into the wider discourse pushed in Toshima’s own anime city strategy through the videos playing outside the building. Animate contributes to attempts to shift spatial practice around Ikebukuro – shifting the associations made with their business from being about female consumers and their queer fantasies towards being a “sensational” must-visit area for all anime and manga fans.



Figure 5.3: An image of the screen outside of the Animate Ikebukuro Flagship, displaying a video advertising the region as a “sensational anime and manga destination.” Photo taken by author in August 2023.

At the same time, the heavy focus on fans of BL, typically presumed female, is highly visible in Animate itself. The store features a large BL section that takes-up most of the third floor, and panels next to the escalator between the first and second floor often features advertisements for BL series (Figure 5.4).<sup>43</sup> Massive advertising images are also placed on the walls of the third floor itself (Figure 5.5).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the building features on the first floor a small café called Gratte where images of characters can be placed onto coffee foam, with cookies and other café-themed goods also sold. Amongst the rotating series featured here, a significant number were BL series, and the imagery is frequently highly suggestive (Figure 5.6). Contrasting to the extreme caution seen in the online spaces described earlier, there is very little attempt to hide this imagery from the sight of “normal” consumers; Figure 5.4 is openly visible upon walking into the building. Queerness is not hidden inside Animate, and there is no clear regulation of the visibility of BL, or the suggestive imagery connected with it. The centrality of queer fantasies to

<sup>43</sup> The first floor is the ground floor of the building. – I have chosen to use the same floor numbering as Animate Ikebukuro themselves use in this chapter.

<sup>44</sup> In the first months after the remodelled store opened in 2023, the store was decorated with signed drawings by various manga artists – many of whom were BL artists.

consumption in Ikebukuro and the importance of these groups to Animate are highly visible in the building itself. Animate presents two readings of Ikebukuro – one that presents it as an anime city for all, and another a paradise targeting the queer fantasies of the female fan. The former is seen in advertisements and presentations of the region to the popular media, which obfuscates the latter; ambiguity is maintained around the presence of queerness in Ikebukuro from the outside looking in.



Figure 5.4: An image of the main escalator at the entrance of the Animate Ikebukuro flagship featuring an advertisement for the Korean BL series *Love Jinx*. Photo taken by author in June 2023.





Figure 5.5: Large display on the BL floor of the Animate Ikebukuro Flagship. Photo taken by author in August 2023.

**「グルメなまものに  
愛されています」**

Gratte  
animate cafe

グラッテとは  
ドリンクの缶と缶にキャラクターをプリントしたグラフィックラッテ。  
アニメイトの店舗内に専用のイートインスペースがございます。同じ様子をプリントしたアイシングクッキーも販売しています。

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クッキー・出張販売店  
アニメイト  
札幌・京都・天王寺・福岡/バルコ  
※クッキー出張販売店ではアイシングクッキー・焼菓・特産品も扱っています。

開催期間  
2023/7/25(火) - 9/10(日)

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605 税込 yen  
テイクアウト  
594 税込 yen

ペーパードリンクが楽しめます  
コーヒー/紅茶/オレンジ  
アップル/抹茶ラテ/ココアなど

アイシング  
クッキー  
イートイン  
550 税込 yen  
テイクアウト  
540 税込 yen

有償  
特典  
アクリルコースター (全9種)  
+500 税込 yen  
特別メニューご注文につき(¥600円(税込))でおひとつご購入いただけます。

※内容は変更になる場合がございます。※特典はイメージです。実際とは異なる場合がございます。  
※店舗によっては在庫切れの場合がございます。ご了承ください。

グラッテ・アイシングクッキーの絵柄は下記番号よりお選び下さい

1 2 3  
4 5  
6 7 8  
9 10

【注文方法】  
■グラッテ・アイシングクッキーは、店舗の注文システムにてご注文ください。  
■クッキー・出張販売店一位は店舗で販売している在庫商品(またはオーダーシート)をレジまでお持ちください。  
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Figure 5.6: An example of a café collaboration between July and September 2023 with a BL series that features suggestive imagery on some of the options. Source: (Animate, 2023).

Even beyond the Animate, queer imagery is ubiquitous in Ikebukuro itself. Large advertisements for BL series are plastered across the station (Figure 5.7), and companies will purchase advertising space to celebrate the birthday of popular male characters.

Advertisements targeting the queer fantasies of the *fujoshi* and *yumejoshi* can be found in the everyday space of the station concourse. The queer fantasies that drove Ikebukuro's fandoms in the early 2000s have not disappeared. There are, in effect, two Ikebukuros: 'anime city' Ikebukuro and *otome* paradise Ikebukuro. Much like Animate, from the outside Ikebukuro is presented as a mecca for all anime/manga fans. In Ikebukuro, the importance of queer fantasies and fans of them is clear, visible across the entire region. While corporate and municipal forces may seek to shift Ikebukuro's portrayal, they cannot completely dislocate and change the connection of the area with queer media and fandoms. Thus, rather than regulate queer imagery inside the region, the focus of these corporate and municipal forces is influencing how the region appears from the outside looking in and controlling the branding of the region in wider media discourse.



Figure 5.7: An example of an advertisement in Ikebukuro Station for BL series. The one in the centre is titled *The Male Dorm Where you Cannot get Hard* (*Tatte wa ikenai danshi ryō*). Photo taken by author in January 2023.

The connection between the municipality and fan activity continues beyond Animate. Immediately adjacent to the Animate is the Toshima Civic Centre, a local governmental office that looks over the surrounding area. Opposite it is *Naka-Ikebukuro* Park, an area often used for the informal trading of goods between fans (Giard, 2024, p. 23). This section of East Ikebukuro is referred to Hareza, an area managed by a



consortium of corporations that is describe on its website as a “symbolic project” (*shinboru purojekuto*) of the Ikebukuro arts and culture plan and is a gathering space for fan activities (Hareza Ikebukuro Area Management, no date). During my fieldwork, I witnessed a large gathering in the Hareza area in September 2023 of fans were primarily engaged in trading goods for *Ensemble Stars*, a male idol series similar to *Hypnosis Mic*. This coincided with a themed café for the franchise held in the area and a large cosplay event being held in the park opposite *Otome* Road. As will be discussed in the next chapter, trading to get more goods of your *oshi*(s) is often a key element in queer fan behaviours, with the Hareza area a physical space to facilitate this. Hareza, while designed and shaped by corporate desires, is still defined by the actions of the fans in the region who continue to use these spaces to facilitate their fantasies. Unlike Akihabara, where parks were repurposed to shift fans away from them (Galbraith, 2019, p. 165), in Ikebukuro Hareza places one at its centre which is heavily defined by consumption and their desires. The two presentations of Ikebukuro coexist in the same space – while control is place over where activity occurs to an extent, there is no attempt to regulate the fans directly.

Alongside Toshima’s shift to encourage Ikebukuro as an anime city, media depictions of the region have also changed. In 2019, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, for example, ran an article referring to the region as “anime Ikebukuro” (*anime no Ikebukuro*) only making passing mention of *Otome* Road as one part of the wider anime and manga infrastructure of the region. Similarly, an article in the *Asahi Shimbun* in October 2023 would also refer to the region as “anime Ikebukuro,” describing *Otome* Road as the “core for the creation of a town” (*machi zukuri no kaku ni*), an important area, but only one part of the now developed anime and manga mecca (Matsuda, 2023). The same television show that broadcast a special on *Otome* Road in 2006 would do a special on the region in April 2023, but with *Otome* Road removed from the title of the segment and references to *fujoshi* now gone (‘Ikebukuro higashiguchi’, 2023). The region is now redefined as not only a mecca for female fans, but one for all anime and manga fans, a space in the media mix that is significant enough to be described as “anime Ikebukuro” – a heartland for fans of the format. Animate, Toshima ward and other corporate entities have sought to use the history of *Otome* Road and its fan cultures as part of a repackaging of the area as an ‘anime city’ for all and not only the female fan of queer media. These groups have not however sought to regulate fan activity greatly in their rebranding efforts. While there has

been a shift towards spaces like Hareza from *Otome Road* there has been no corresponding attempt by the ward to police the behaviour and activities of fans. Ikebukuro highlights how a lighter approach to the regulation of queer fan activities can be mutually beneficial, providing fans a space for their fantasies while enabling corporate and municipal forces to include such fans in their regional rebranding efforts.

### **Queer Anime and Manga in Sendai**

Access to anime and manga meccas like Ikebukuro and the queer possibilities within them are primarily centralised around Japan's major cities of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. I spent my fieldwork year in Sendai in the northern Tōhoku region of Japan. While in recent years most well-known for the triple disaster of 2011, with the earthquake and tsunami occurring off the coast of the city, the region historically stood as a borderland, a “backward” and “undeveloped” realm (Hopson, 2017, p. 2).<sup>45</sup> This assumption runs through discussions of the region in a variety of areas, in queer rights and visibility activism there is often similarly a tendency to negatively compare the ‘backward’ Tōhoku with cities like Tokyo (Sugiura and Maekawa, 2022). From an anime and manga perspective, the city is rarely a focus, with most exhibits and events skipping the city in favour of Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, or when they go to Japan's north, Sapporo. The geographies of fandom in the city reflect this - most anime and manga goods stores are found in a single building across from the main station, EBeans (Figure 5.8), with a smattering of arcades and a couple of shops in a nearby shopping centre. Anime and manga focused stores and fandoms are a relatively marginal existence in Sendai, kept primarily to areas that are limited in space and broadly out of sight.

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<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the history of the region in Japanese thought, see (Hopson, 2017).



Figure 5.8: The EBeans building in Sendai. Photo taken by author in May 2023.

EBeans houses the local Animate store, several trading card game stores, bookstores, general media stores alongside more general shops such as clothing stores. The higher up you go in the building, the more dominant popular culture, and specifically anime and manga becomes. The most otaku-focused goods, as was described to me by locals, including *dōjinshi*, are only found at the top of the building, separated from the floors below. For example, the eighth floor sees a branch of second-hand merchandise store Lashinbang and trading card games store Card-Labo. Each of these chains are prominent parts of Ikebukuro or Akihabara's streetscape, yet in Sendai they are hidden away on the highest floor. Lashinbang is also one of few places in Sendai to buy *dōjinshi*, and many of the female-oriented goods that proliferate in Ikebukuro. Goods that cater to the same queer desires that are widely available and visible in Ikebukuro's landscape are hidden in Sendai, on the highest floor of the complex and almost entirely kept within a single building.

Other locations catering to queer desires surrounding pop culture have also largely closed in Sendai, despite flourishing in Ikebukuro. A significant space for queer desires in the media mix are the collab cafés briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter and which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. These themed cafes provide a public space in

which the indulgence in fantasies utilising character goods is encouraged, setting up shrines at your table and imagining a date with, or between, your *oshi* characters. They appeal widely to fans who look towards characters romantically, offering exclusive goods and (expensive) themed food and drink. One of these cafes operated in Sendai, within Ebeans, between 2015 and 2021, closing amidst the pandemic. In its place, opened within the main Animate store on the seventh floor, is a café stand of the same chain as the one in the Ikebukuro flagship store, but which was almost always empty when I visited. Ikebukuro has a total of four Animate cafes, a stand, a themed doughnut store and a Gratte, with the latter two opening between 2021 and 2023, most of which are consistently busy. Sendai lacks the infrastructure and population to support more expansive fandom spaces, and as a result, lacks much appeal to major producers to support doing so. Meanwhile, Ikebukuro, and the possibilities of the space continue to expand.

This is not just a Sendai story. Animate collab cafés have become almost entirely centred on Ikebukuro with closures since 2019 in major regional cities like Kobe and Fukuoka, and other areas of Tokyo such as Akihabara and Shinjuku. Outside Ikebukuro, branches remain only in Osaka and Nagoya. Nationwide chains of similar cafes, such as Princess Café, have also contracted markedly, falling from twelve stores in Japan in 2018 to just one in Ikebukuro (Princess Cafe, 2018, 2024). On one of the largest websites for collecting fan events in Japan, also named Collabo Café, the first listed region is Ikebukuro, a sign of its dominance as a space for characters and fans and *oshikatsu* in Japan (*Korabo kafe*, no date). Ikebukuro is evermore the place to go not only for those seeking queer desires and affective encounters with characters, but for anime and manga fans in general. However, this leaves smaller cities, such as Sendai, on the margins. While there may not be significant regulation of fan activities in cities like Sendai, there is a lack of space for such activities to begin with. Thus, fans are only able to experience these possibilities through online spaces, which as was discussed earlier are often have significant self-regulation by fans or making a potentially expensive trip to Tokyo. Access to the queer possibilities of the media is more limited if you are not located near a major city (ideally Tokyo). As more resources are concentrated on Ikebukuro as it emerges as an ‘anime city’ rebranding it from the heartland of the *otome*, at the same time similar subcultural areas in Sendai have not only failed to grow but seemingly declined in the 2020s.

## Conclusion – Space, Queerness and Regulation

In late August 2023, I made a trip to Osaka, spending a significant amount of time in Nipponbashi, or Den Den Town, its anime and manga fandom mecca. While dominated by card game shops, the region has a mash-up of elements from Ikebukuro and Akihabara. From the latter are multiple maid cafés and their touts who line the street. From the former is an *Otome* section in one of the large second-hand stores, and several collab cafés around the area. Osaka’s anime and manga mecca, while larger than Sendai, reflects its equivalents in Tokyo, drawing on both Ikebukuro and Akihabara and, most notably, businesses closely associated with queer fantasy. Yet even here I still came across an advertisement outside a large second-hand goods store for a branch that had opened four months prior in Ikebukuro (Figure 5.9), declaring it to be a “palace of anime.” The influence of physical spaces such as Ikebukuro and its queer media fandoms far extends beyond Tokyo more broadly into the media mix and the other spaces that form a part of it. I observed much the same in Nagoya when I visited in July 2023 – many businesses with their roots in Ikebukuro and even a BL-themed collab café. Ikebukuro stands at the forefront of a wider trend in the media mix towards queer consumption focused on female fandom; one that seeks to co-opt their fantasies rather than hide and regulate them.



Figure 5.9: An advertisement for the April 2023 opening of Lashinbang Ikebukuro *Kyara* Palace found outside of Lashinbang Osaka Nipponbashi. Photo taken by author in August 2023.

This chapter has looked at the relationship between space and queer representation in the media through two perspectives: online platforms and physical geographies. To do so, I have focused on the regulation process of the Circuit of Culture. Regulation is not only the result of legal codes that limit societally unacceptable forms of expression – consumers and producers are also heavily involved in the process. In this chapter we have seen how diverse groupings from fans to corporations to municipal bodies have influenced the visibility of queer fan desires in a variety of spaces. *Hypnosis Mic* fandom highlighted how, despite the potential for forming connections that are not constrained by location, online spaces can also spread and facilitate panic. Thus, fandom norms become a central part of the organisation of fandom, leading to queer fantasies that are deemed inappropriate to be further marginalised within lest they break public morals. Regulation is not just a “reproduction of the status quo” (Thompson, 1997a, p. 3), it can also come from within communities that consume and produce queer media. Physical spaces provide a solution – in Ikebukuro while there is an attempt to co-opt and define the areas queer media fandoms exist within, there is little attempt to regulate the activities themselves and how fans express themselves. Moreover, there are two readings of the space available which maintains a certain ambiguity in the popular media and by extension public imaginations – Ikebukuro can both be a queer space and a normative one. However, such possibilities are limited by scale and geography. In a smaller, regional city such as Sendai access is limited and while there may be limited regulation of fan activities, there are few spaces for fans to congregate and indulge in their queer fantasies. Thus, fans must either keep their queer fan activities private or turn to online fandom spaces and the regulations that may exist on fans within them.

Thus, we see two key elements of queer fandom emerge from this: it is closely linked into the norms of fandom and how they understand what an appropriate way is to act and display your *oshikatsu*. Production is aware of these norms, and as with *Hypnosis Mic*, seems to intervene in ways that reflect their understanding of the dominant discourses from the side of consumption. The second key element, which will be elaborated on in the next chapter, is that queer representation is a form of *contents* to be co-opted by key stakeholders. Rather than something deviant to be stamped out, queerness is something to be monetised and used to create and catalyse further consumption within the Japanese media sphere.

Key to the facilitation of these spaces is their role in the media mix. For *Hypnosis Mic*, fandom speculation over official guidelines may be read as a debate over what is appropriate activity to do in the name of the brand – to be considered a part of its media mix. For Ikebukuro, the shift towards an ‘anime city’ brings the region greater association with the infrastructures of the anime industry, and the media mix marketing that is central to it. The media mix in Japan is closely connected to space, which itself is shaped by the cultural background and the relationship between consumption and production. Yet, looking at spaces themselves only describes one part of the wider media mix and how representations of queerness intersect with it. In the next chapter, I will take an in-depth look at the actual goods themselves and the characters within.

## 6. Consumption: *Yowamushi Pedal* and Queerness in the Media Mix

When I arrived in Sendai for my fieldwork in September 2022, I had planned to research the long-running high school road cycling series *Yowamushi Pedal*, which had that month commenced the fifth season of its anime. With a then 14-year history and countless pieces of merchandise, adaptations, spin-offs and fan made works, the show seemed the perfect candidate for discussing the representation of queerness in media marketing. Yet, despite a new anime, a long history and a still sizable fanbase, I could find next to no new merchandise being produced and little in the way of promotion. The one exception was a limited time *Yowamushi Pedal* themed café in Tokyo.

The day after I arrived, I booked a table in one of several eighty-minute time slots on a Wednesday afternoon two weeks later. The café, operated by the Chugai Mining Company, was located on the seventh floor of the large MODI shopping centre in Shibuya.<sup>46</sup> Originally opened in 2021, the café was a cheaply constructed venue decorated with chandeliers above the tables and faux-tile walls. Around the café were spaces for character portraits and merchandise displays that could be quickly changed between time-limited seasons for collaborations. With COVID-19 restrictions still in place in 2022, most tables also had plastic separators making it harder to interact with other customers.



Figure 6.1: The Inside of the Chūgai Grace Café on 12 October 2022. Photo by author.

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<sup>46</sup> The Chugai Mining Company has a large *contents*-production section that acts separate to its main business, and they frequently have large booths at anime and manga events such as the biannual Comic Market (Comiket). The only official explanation provided for the opening of the department is that the head of the general affairs division in 2013 was a fan of the anime *Gintama* and pushed for the company to involve themselves in the series' merchandising (Mantan Web, 2015).



The café's menu was filled with themed foods, in this case literally based on the series' characters running a restaurant/café, with the character names adorning individual items. Each of these dishes came with a placemat, which had one of twelve designs on them, distributed at random. After being given an explanation of the rules of this café, we were left to make our orders and purchase merchandise from the selection of products that were exclusive available while this cafe was open. To my left, one customer ordered seemingly everything on the menu, amassing placemats they put into a plastic folder full of previously collected merchandise. To my right, two people had come in together but then set up what seemed to be separate shrines to certain characters, featuring acrylic stands (small stands cut into the shape of a character with an image on them), badges and even a framed picture. They barely ordered anything, seemingly most interested in taking pictures with the character they brought with them. Towards the end of our allocated timeslot, people started to wander around the space to the posters of the characters on the wall and take selfies with their favourites. Many of the customers appeared to have come to the café not to socialize with other humans but to do so with images of their favourite character, using the space to facilitate a fantasy.

This is what is known as a collab café, which can be defined as a space for limited time food and drink promotions themed around a specific series featuring exclusive merchandise. During my fieldwork year collab cafés were a common event for *Yowamushi Pedal*; on the same trip to Tokyo, I also visited another *Yowamushi Pedal* café in Ikebukuro. They are similarly widespread as marketing activities for other popular series. These cafés link together consumption, merchandising practices and queerness through the possibilities they create for fan interactions with the characters and the world surrounding them. At the same time, the limited season for each collaboration encourages multiple visits and purchases of the expensive exclusive merchandise. As such they exploit fan desires, attempting to monetise the potential queer possibilities of the series they are themed around.

In this chapter, I focus on the role of consumption in the Circuit of Culture, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods. In the Circuit of Culture model, consumption is a process from which “meaning is actively made” by the consumers – they do not passively receive texts from production (du Gay *et al.*, 1997, p. 5). Consumers produce meanings from the texts they read – for example through *oshikatsu* (fan

activities) performed in collab cafés (Mackay, 1997, p. 11). As discussed in the previous chapter, fans perform immaterial work through their activities in spaces like collab cafés, undertaking public activities that display their bonds with the characters (Negri, 1999; Galbraith, 2019, p. 189). These fan activities then influence the producers of media texts and the meanings they encode within them (Mackay, 1997, p. 11). I argue in this chapter that the meanings produced by fans through their *oshikatsu* are often queer – focusing on romantic fantasies both between and with the characters. To explore the connection between consumption and queerness in the Japanese media, this chapter turns to a case study of the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal* (2008-present) - a high school road cycling series by Watanabe Wataru that has been serialised in the magazine *Weekly Shōnen Champion* since 2008.

This chapter draws on both qualitative and quantitative data. My qualitative methods draw primarily on discourse analysis and fieldwork performed between September 2022 and September 2023 in Sendai, Tokyo and Osaka.<sup>47</sup> My observations in this chapter have been based on a mixture of written fieldnotes and photographic taken during my fieldwork in these cities. For my quantitative analysis, I performed social media analysis using my corpus of 321,078 tweets collected between August 2022 and April 2023 that was introduced in chapter two. This chapter will focus on five main areas of the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*: merchandise design, fandom networks, merchandise sales, collab cafés and paratexts other than merchandise.

Building on the approach to marketing presented in the previous chapter, I argue that the media mix highlights the importance of two key elements. First, that queer representation is heavily balanced between different types of queer desires. A single work must appeal to fans of same-sex couplings and fans of coupling themselves with characters. Producers therefore balance different forms of queer desire which may conflict in what they seek to get from the characters. Second, the media mix reveals the importance of *contents* (*kontentsu*) - the “packaging [of] cultural goods within commodity forms” (Steinberg, 2019, p. 65) - to how queerness is represented in the Japanese media. Every text in the media mix acts as a form of *contents*, something that can create a commodity out of anything and within any medium or platform. In the context of the

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<sup>47</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, I made eight trips to Tokyo and two to the Kansai region.

LGBT Boom, queer representation is *contents*. Through an exploration of how consumption works within the *Yowamushi Pedal* media mix highlights how heavily queerness in Japanese media is defined by how it is transformed into saleable *contents*.

### **Media Mix Merchandising as Representation**

As discussed in the previous chapter, media mixes form a central part of the Japanese media sphere as franchises are spread across mediums, formats and platforms. Behind these media mixes is each series worldview (*sekaikan*), the setting that the characters exist within. Central to this is merchandising, as the vector through which a consumer can primarily access the world of the series and the characters within beyond the original text. These characters act as vectors for affect and are central to the queer fantasies of fans. These affective reactions can constitute, a form of “love” for the characters in question (Condry, 2011), one that turns away from cisheteronormative reality towards the realm of 2D characters for romance. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the role the actual merchandise itself plays in facilitating these kinds of relationships, the practices that surround them and how they are designed to facilitate affective reactions through queer fantasies they arguably reflect and represent.

Merchandising, adaptations and spin-offs are an important part of understanding a text, what it represents and how it is being consumed. Representation is not only located in the original text, but it can also be found in those works that surround them, the paratexts. As Gray (2010, p. 3) argues, advertisements, merchandise and other paratextual works shape our understanding of a text, even before we have seen it. These paratexts can “create [texts] and continue them” (Gray, 2010, p. 10); what is represented within them does not only extend the original but also creates new ways to interact with its world. In marketing techniques such as the media mix where paratexts that add to the world are produced constantly, the original text eventually loses its centrality in a franchise (Azuma, 2001, p. 63; Steinberg, 2012, pp. 160–161). For fans, *Yowamushi Pedal* is more than just a manga, it is a “world” that not even the original writer has complete control over (Kennell, 2023, p. 14). The meaning of a series like *Yowamushi Pedal* is thus shaped not only by the original text that produced the world of the series, but also by how people experience this world through adaptations, pieces of merchandise and things like collab cafés. Just as important as the series narrative and characters to how it is understood is its location within marketing forms such as the media mix. By extension, queer

representation can also be found in the media mix, even where queerness was not explicit, or was only hinted at, in the text(s) that the marketing is initially based on.

Broadly speaking there are three major types of paratexts in the media mix: character goods - merchandise focused on one or more characters - adaptations and bonus material such as interviews that add to the original textual narrative. Merchandise in the media mix is primarily simple but mass-producible goods such as button badges, illustration cards known as bromides, figures and plastic folders. Alongside this are adaptations, frequently of a manga into anime, and bonus material, such as spin-off narratives focused on characters' stories outside the main narratives or interviews with creatives. This is all surrounded by the marketing practices that are used to sell the merchandise and both production and consumption-end discourses. Consumption is constantly supported by the symbiotic relationship between narratives from the original text and fragments of information revealed through the paratexts that constitute the media mix. Through bringing these elements together, consumers can create narratives surrounding the characters that place them into fantasies that can help fulfil their affective needs.

The affective qualities of the character and the design of merchandise is something that has previously been explored in relation to the male otaku, as discussed in the previous chapter. Azuma (2001), argues that this is encompassed in *kyara moe*, a strong affective reaction (*moe*) to a character (*kyara*). As he argues, the focal point of consumption is not engrossment in a fictional world and its larger story, but in fragments (*danpen*) such as illustrations of characters which consumers can project their emotions onto (*kanjō inyū*) (Azuma, 2001, p. 58). However, as Galbraith (2019, pp. 115–116) notes, the narrative of the series remains important, giving life to the characters, building up their relationship with others and highlighting their appeal. The narrative of the series can then be extended by the consumer through the fantasies they create from the fragmentary depictions of the characters that appear in the media mix. These consumer-driven narratives can take a variety of shapes, with the paratexts - the *danpen* - facilitating queer readings of the series that may not be explicit in the original text.

Supporting these fantasies is the media mix, expressed both through texts produced by the rights-holders (*kōshiki*) and fan-created texts such as *dōjinshi*, derivative manga that often place characters into imagined romances. Queer narratives about the

characters are then formed by what Saitō (2019) refers as a “superscriptional chain” that morphs the narrative of the series and its characters around the connections made by consumers between texts in the media mix. While production may drive marketing, it is consumers who form and adapt narratives through their interactions with the media mix. What each part of the media mix signifies is not just determined in a top-down manner but is equally the result of the way that consumption creates and, I argue, queers them. Producers in turn respond to these fan narratives, acknowledging them in subtle ways without explicit acceptance. This tension between explicit and implicit acknowledgment of queer consumption and adaptation has subsequently become a battleground over how media texts are understood and represented amongst Japanese media consumers.

The work of the key scholars I have mentioned in this chapter so far - Azuma (2001) and Galbraith (2019) - is primarily focused on male fandom cultures of the 1990s and 2000s, located in a growth in academic and popular interest in the male otaku. The boom in the Boys Love (BL) genre in the 2010s demonstrated that media mixes are also seemingly designed to attract female fans who seek to create queer narratives with various characters. These consumers seek queer narratives that they either get from works directly targeted at them, such as BL, or by “recycling” characters from pre-existing franchises (Ernest dit Alban, 2020). While a growing focus on female consumers and their fantasies in some forms of anime and manga media marketing was noted in writing in the 2000s (see Sugiura, 2006b), the importance of female consumers has only grown. This chapter also focuses on female consumers and their relationship with the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*. I argue that by looking at the consumption of primarily female fans we can see how queer representation acts as a form of *contents* that drives engagement with the media mixes are central to media marketing in Japan.

### **Media Mixes and Queerness: A Brief Background**

The development of the media mix and its relationship with queer fantasies can be primarily set against the background of the 1990s and 2000s, emerging adjacent to the cultural discourses surrounding sexuality and gender of the period. The rise of the anime and manga bookstores that occurred in spaces such as Ikebukuro in the 1980s and 1990s, saw a corresponding proliferation of character goods (Ernest dit Alban, 2020). For example, button badges started to grow in popularity in the 1990s, with some stores allowing customers to use badge makers to create custom ones (Ishibashi *et al.*, 2022a).

Popular manga and anime series began producing musical albums featuring both solo songs by characters and group songs by units or pairs. *Hunter x Hunter*, a popular manga series that runs to this day, though is currently on hiatus, saw multiple stage adaptations in this period (Sugawa-Shimada, 2021, pp. 111–112). The 1990s saw a wide expansion in the Japanese media mix and the formats into which it permeated more broadly.

Additionally, there was a growth in the popularity of *dōjinshi* in the 1980s and 1990s, with attendance at Comiket, the largest convention for the sale of such works, heavily increasing (Galbraith, 2019, p. 113). One of the most popular types of *dōjinshi* sold at Comiket was *yaoi* - male-male romance *dōjinshi* – which were popular with the largely female consumer base that made and enjoyed them (Fujimoto, 2020, pp. 9–10).<sup>48</sup> As *yaoi*, and *dōjinshi* more generally, grew in popularity over the 1980s and 1990s, stores popped up in places such as Ikebukuro to facilitate the sale and purchase of them second-hand (Ernest dit Alban, 2020, pp. 150–151). The success of *yaoi* also contributed to the proliferation of professionally published BL in the 1990s – many BL writers had originally been *dōjinshi* artists (Mizoguchi, 2015, p. 39). Over the 1990s and early 2000s corporations sought to monetise the queer fantasies of fans as one part of their developing media mix strategies.

One effect of corporations placing a greater focus on queer fantasies was the growth of spaces like *Otome Road* in Ikebukuro and the development of stores and services that catered to fans of queer media, as discussed in the last chapter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term *fujoshi* also emerged in the early 2000s in popular discourse as a female counterpart to the male otaku (Sugiura, 2006a; Mizoguchi, 2015, pp. 48–49; Hori and Mori, 2020b, p. 59). The term *fujoshi* was thus heavily tied into assumptions around femininity in Japanese society, with media coverage of the period placing emphasis on what these BL fans revealed about the issues facing women in Japanese society (Sugiura, 2006a, 2006b). In the mid-2000s, concurrent to wider growth in media discourse around gender discussed in chapter one, the Japanese fan became evermore defined by their gender and what that said about their consumptive habits and sexuality as a result.

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<sup>48</sup> *Yaoi* is short for *yama nashi ochi nashi imi nashi* (no point, no climax, no meaning), a wry reference to the smutty contents of these *dōjinshi*. The term *yaoi* is also still used to this day within English-language fan cultures for the BL genre more generally.

One of the most visible areas where a shift to focus on queer fantasies occurred was in the marketing of sports series that were published in magazines targeting young male audiences (*shōnen*) but marketed themselves towards a female audience. Sports is a particularly well-suited genre for this style of marketing as it is typically gendered; the main players and almost all the characters are a single gender, generally male. The popularity of the long-running series *Prince of Tennis* (1999-present), for example, led to a wide range of related products from to dating games (*otome* games), stage plays that targeted the female demographic (Kataoka, 2004), albums of songs sung in-character, and the publication of numerous character data books that provided more insight into the characters. These then can be fit into a superscriptional chain, mentioned above, to create queer fantasies surrounding the characters (Saitō, 2019). Each paratext provides a new fragment of information about the character that could then be slotted into the narratives formed by the fans surrounding each character. The *contents* of the media mix facilitate queer readings of the characters and their relationships.

These paratexts can also support multiple readings. For example, the book in Figure 6.2 – a collection of supplementary information about two characters from *Prince of Tennis* known as a character guide (*kyarakutā gaido*) - supports three different readings.<sup>49</sup> First is a homoerotic one between the characters, facilitated by the imagery of them on the cover. The guide itself also includes an ‘interview’ with the pair where they provide their impressions of each other and share more information about their relationship not seen in the original manga (Konomi, 2011, pp. 15–17). The second reading places the consumer in an imaginary relationship with one or both characters about whom information ranging from their favourite foods to their preferred dating spots is included in the guide (Konomi, 2011, pp. 8–9). The characters are not looking at each other on the cover but at the consumer holding the book, helping to facilitate that sense of a (potential) relationship between fictional character and consumer. Finally, the text can be seen simply as additional background information for fans about these characters but not necessarily something that speaks to the relationship between them or the characters and consumer. All of these are signified by the same paratext, which can be associated with several possible meanings depending on the consumer and their

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<sup>49</sup> These books are also often called data books by English-speaking fans.

relationship with the work. Representation is therefore balanced between multiple potential consumer groups – from fans uninterested in any queer narratives to *fujoshi* and *yumejoshi*. I will explore such an approach to queer representation in the media mix through the high school road cycling *Yowamushi Pedal*, the main case study of this chapter



Figure 6.2: A character data book for Prince of Tennis. Photo by author.

### ***Yowamushi Pedal***

*Yowamushi Pedal* (2008-present) follows Onoda Sakamichi, an otaku who has a talent for hill cycling, and the road cycling team at Sōhoku high school in Chiba prefecture as they seek to win the nationwide high school cycling tournament, the “inter-high.” Standing in their way are several rival teams, with the most prominent being Hakone, based in the town of the same name in Kanagawa prefecture. Starting in Onoda’s first year of high school, the series has moved slowly and is currently set in his third year, having followed him and his team through victories across two inter-high tournaments. As of January 2024, the series has sold around 30,000,000 volumes in total over its fifteen years of serialisation, and has spawned 5 seasons of anime, a spin-off manga, a yearly stage adaptation and both animated and live-action films (Weekly\_Champion, 2024). The series is also closely connected to discourses surrounding otaku masculinity through Onoda – which I will argue makes the series well-suited to a queer analysis.

The series is linked to the discourses that surrounded masculinity in the media in the mid-2000s. In Japan, the masculine ideal is represented by the salaryman – a heterosexual office worker who gets married and provides for his family (Slater and



Galbraith, 2011; Barber, 2014, p. 138; Dasgupta, 2017, p. 32). The ideal man is a symbol of strength, a “central supporting pillar” (*daikokubashira*) that should avoid ‘feminine’ traits – such as being emotional or excessive consumption (Slater and Galbraith, 2011; Dasgupta, 2013, p. 45, 2017, p. 33). In the postwar era, the salaryman came to constitute hegemonic masculinity in Japan, the form of masculinity that is culturally ascendent in a society and is “currently accepted” as the ideal way to be a man (Connell, 1987, pp. 297–298, 2021, p. 77; Barber, 2014; Dasgupta, 2017, p. 32). Hegemonic masculinity is not the only form of masculinity in a society, but it is the idealised form that all men should seek to achieve (Connell, 1987, p. 300, 2021, pp. 77–78; Hidaka, 2010, p. 2; Dasgupta, 2013, p. 54). Amidst multiple decades of economic malaise in Japan since the 1990s, the idealised salaryman masculinity has become increasingly unachievable, however. In the 2000s a greater focus was thus placed in media texts on subordinate forms of masculinity that could be alternatives to the hegemonic ideal (Slater and Galbraith, 2011; Barber, 2014). Onoda - the *yowamushi* (lit. weakling) of the title – is a representation of one of these: otaku masculinity.

What defines the otaku can often be unclear and vary by person – in my survey data the question asking whether a person considered themselves an otaku had the highlight percentage of respondents answering unknown for any question at 23.2%. When speaking of otaku masculinity, there is always a certain measure of uncertainty in who does and does not count. Broadly speaking, otaku masculinity has often been defined in the media since the 2000s by sexual immaturity, social awkwardness and a focus on consuming forms of popular culture as an escape from reality (Slater and Galbraith, 2011; Kam, 2013; Ernest dit Alban, 2022). The consumption of the otaku is often treated as feminine, enjoying forms of media associated with women such as *dōjinshi*, female idol groups and media featuring young girls (Kam, 2013; Dasgupta, 2017, p. 33). Onoda is one of these otakus - a lonely individual who spends most of his money on merchandise of his favourite character from an anime meant for young girls. Otaku masculinity was especially prominent in the popular media of the mid-2000s, set-off by the success of *Densha otoko* (2003, Train Man), a romance about a virgin “Akihabara otaku” (Kam, 2013; Galbraith, 2019). Watanabe’s last manga before he began writing *Yowamushi Pedal* had been a manga adaptation of *Densha Otoko*, with the appearance of the main character being similar to Onoda. In an interview in February 2023, Watanabe further

indicated that *Densha otoko*'s protagonist was a significant inspiration for Onoda (Dōmoto and Watanabe, 2023). Onoda reflects Watanabe's understanding of otaku masculinity – not as being defined by loneliness and overconsumption but by being a hard worker that can overcome any barrier while being true to themselves (Dōmoto and Watanabe, 2023). In doing so, Onoda represents a challenge to assumptions of what a man should be – it is being he is a 'weakling' otaku that he is such a hard worker and able to achieve success as a cyclist.

The popularity of this series also fits within a wider shift in sports media of the 2000s towards highlighting failure and imperfect masculinities (Collins, 2012; Barber, 2014). Onoda's best qualities as an athlete are connected to his otaku-ness. His skill in hill climbing comes from making regular 90 km bicycle round trips to Akihabara through hilly terrain so he can save money to buy more merchandise (Watanabe, 2008-present, vol. 1, pp. 43-44). At key moments in races throughout the series, Onoda inspires other characters by singing the theme song of his favourite anime and having them join in. Other characters start to watch the show under Onoda's influence. It is in his queer *otaku* masculinity that Onoda finds his strength. At the core of both Onoda, and *Yowamushi Pedal* overall, is a rejection of discourses that suggest that those who do not match the gendered norms of society are a failure or immature.

*Yowamushi Pedal* is thus a product of the cultural flows from which it arose – a manga that draws off the heavily gendered discourse of the 2000s and the boom in discussion about the masculinity and sexuality of the male *otaku*. However, its media mix primarily started in the 2010s, first with a stage adaptation in 2010 and then the anime in 2013. This series, born of the 2000s and popularised during the 2010s, maps onto a period in which the male *otaku* started to take a backseat to the female fan and her queer fantasies. Following the evolution of *Yowamushi Pedal*'s media mix over this period of shifting cultural discourses to gender and sexuality allows a better understanding of the changing role that queerness has taken in Japanese media marketing.

### **Goods and their Design**

My first encounter with *Yowamushi Pedal* merchandise was at Comiket in December 2017. As a moderate fan of the series, I decided to stand in what turned out to be an hour and a half long line to buy some folders that were only available at the event. In front of me were a pair of young women talking about their favourite characters, with one

remarking that she had recently started getting into three characters rather than focusing on just the one. Standing alongside the lines were people with folders of merchandise, mainly badges, to be traded with others. When I looked at all the available merchandise (Figure 6.3), particularly striking was the rather expensive (4,500 yen/GBP30 in 2017) collection of small goods (a pouch, a small tote bag, comb and a small towel) branded to a single character in the bottom left. A general fan of the series, I had no idea what was going on; it almost felt as if I had been watching a different series to those around me. For years after this experience stuck in my mind - what was the appeal of this expensive merchandise to these consumers?



Figure 6.3: The Product Listing from Comiket for Akita Shoten in December 2017.  
Source: (CM\_akitashoten, 2017).

Much of the merchandise for *Yowamushi Pedal* follows set themes. For each merchandise line the characters are given a unique design following this theme that is then plastered on a variety of items. The same image will appear on badges, folders, stickers, postcards among others. One particularly clear example of this can be seen by looking at the set of two plastic A4 files pictured in Figure 6.4, taken from a merchandise line sold at Animate in December 2023 with an “after-school snowball fight” (*hōkago*

*yukigassen*) theme. While sold as a set, the characters are printed on separate files, so a fan interested in only one character can simply ignore the presence of the other, or as is often the case, trade it with another fan. The imagery on the files also works together, meaning if you fan them out, they feature complementary images. A fan looking to couple these characters could easily imagine them as being on a winter date, snowboarding and/or having a snowball fight with each other. Equally, the images work as standalones. The characters are facing forward, smiling at the consumer. Each individual file only includes images of a single character, so the consumer can insert themselves as the person either character is looking at. The images on the file allow the consumer to imagine themselves going on a winter date, snowboarding and/or having a snowball fight with their preferred character, just as with the fans who enjoy the idea of two characters doing these activities together. Finally, you could read this in a completely homosocial lens, these characters are simply rivals and friends. The design of this single item facilitates several possible readings, they represent fragments to be placed into one's wider narrative surrounding each character.



Figure 6.4: The front and back of a two-file set from the *hōkago yukigassen* merchandise line. Pictures by author.

The creation of narratives from these folders is another example of the earlier mentioned concept of the “superscriptional chain” as these goods are connected in a chain of meaning that is related to each consumer’s own experience and approach to the franchise (Saitō, 2019). The merchandise offers a variety of readings such that not only can a consumer uninterested in any queer reading see this as homosocial, but it balances between the desires of *fujoshi* and *yumejoshi*. For example, one account I found through my corpus posts pictures of themselves with acrylic stands of their favourite BL coupling

(the pair in Figure 6.4) for the series nearly everywhere they go. This account lists in their biography that they are a fan of this coupling before anything else – it is clear what reading of the pair the merchandise represents to them. This was not the only possible reading, however. Another account in my corpus bought the same folders in figure 6.4 out of interest for only one of the characters, one of their *oshi*, because the art gave them such a strong affective reaction (*moe modaete*). While the reaction was still affective, it was not out of imagining a queer relationship between the characters but instead out of their love for an individual character. What this merchandise represents to both sets of consumers will differ slightly as they are associating it with different chains of meaning. The merchandise and what it represents is balanced not only between queer and non-queer readings, but different types of queer readings. Which reading is preferred by the fan depends on how they create meaning from these goods through their consumption of *Yowamushi Pedal*.

While the availability of multiple readings for a piece of merchandise is certainly a product of particular fan desires, it is also arguably a result of production seeking to avoid explicitness to maximise the potential audience size. *Fujoshi* and *yumejoshi* are different and represent different desires, but they often exist within the same spaces, both online and in-person. These consumers all belong to the same “cluster” – the term used to describe online fandoms for a given series introduced in the previous chapter (Giard, 2024). Fans in a cluster may have slightly variable desires but they are linked by their shared enjoyment of *Yowamushi Pedal* and fantasies surrounding the series. When I went to events, pop-up stores and exhibits, I was consistently able to see fans with merchandise of a single character, of pairs of characters and of groups of them. Moreover, fans on X/Twitter sometimes make “introduction cards” (*jikoshōkai kādo*) (see Figure 6.5), in which they can mark the types of activities they enjoy. In these cards it is common to see both BL coupling and *yume* activities marked, albeit the latter with some additional clarification. One striking example of this is an account on X/Twitter that identifies itself as a *yumejoshi* for a specific character, whose merchandise they post pictures of in plastic covers with hearts, flowers and other romantic imagery. Consumption is just as much about individual desire as it can be about community and shared bonds in communities of consumers (Stevens, 2010, p. 202). While a single item can be evidence of different queer fantasies depending on the consumer, all fans are united in pursuit of the same

merchandise lines, purchase them from the same places and attend the same events. The shared pursuit of these goods then facilitates the formation of communities based around fans supporting each other's queer consumption of *Yowamushi Pedal*.

This image has been redacted by the author for privacy reasons.

Figure 6.5: An anonymised example of a Self-Introduction Card that is shared amongst fans of *Yowamushi Pedal* on X/Twitter.

### **Exchange Communities: Fandom and Networks**

In October 2023, I attended a *Yowamushi Pedal* exhibit at Mangaten in West Ikebukuro, a chain that mixes a café-like set-up with small exhibit spaces and in some cases talks by writers. When compared to the Chūgai Grace Café discussed earlier in this chapter, the restrictions on activities were more relaxed which facilitated some level of interaction. Towards the end of my timeslot, a few of the attendees with big plastic cases (and one who had a small suitcase) started enthusiastically trading with each other. After

discovering they shared the same *oshi* (having loudly proclaimed as much) they exchanged contact information and left together. This is just one of many similar scenes I witnessed during my fieldwork. Despite COVID-19 restrictions on limiting direct interactions, there was always some social aspects at *Yowamushi Pedal* events I attended. Giard (2024, p. 27) describes these as the “assistance networks” that are needed to make “love ‘possible’” for these consumers. Without a network of fellow fans to support them, it can be difficult for an individual to amass all the merchandise they need for their forms of *oshikatsu*, and the creation of queer narratives surrounding the characters.

The importance of fan networks comes through strongly in my twitter corpus, collected between August 2022 and April 2023 and amounting to 321,028 tweets.<sup>50</sup> Many of the most commonly used vocabulary in these fan communities are terms surrounding trading and network building; the creation of “assistance networks” online for their fantasies (the full list is available in appendix B).<sup>51</sup> Five of the ten most frequently used terms were related to trading, with “exchange” (*kōkan*) in second and “handover” (*jōto*) ranked eighth. The most frequent term was the stem for the verbs to watch and to see (*mi*), a common verb that was used in tweets about viewing the anime as well as posts making general observations about the characters and the series. In position three in frequency was “periodic” (*teiki*), a phrase often attached to tweets that a user posts periodically stating their fannish preferences and series they enjoy – briefly discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>52</sup> The merchandise may encourage the formulation of fantasies in their design, but they also encourage fans to interact with one another to aid each other’s consumptive aims. Community is then formed around media mixes and fans who seek to exploit the queer possibilities within through forming human connections.

Analysis to see the most common connections between words in my corpus further confirms the importance of connectivity and interaction amongst fans. Figure 6.6 shows a semantic network graph, each word represented by a node and the lines tracing the connections between them: the thicker the line the stronger the connection.<sup>53</sup> As

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<sup>50</sup> See chapter two for more details on this corpus and the quanteda software used to analyse it.

<sup>51</sup> I have removed the two terms used by the tweet scraping software to search for tweets – *Yowamushi Pedal* and *Yowapeda* as at least one of these two terms will be in every tweet.

<sup>52</sup> The most commonly named series in my corpus other than *Yowamushi Pedal* was the high school volleyball series *Haikyū!!*.

<sup>53</sup> Due to computing limitations, this was limited to the 100 most commonly used words. The function used was `textplot_network` (see Watanabe and Müller, no date).





were related to exchange, with three of them focusing on how exchange occurs. The importance of the methods of exchange are also visible in figure 6.6 as terms such as in-person exchange (*tewatashi*), postage fee (*sōryō*) and recommended retail price (*teika*) surround the terms used for exchange. The most strongly collocated terms in my corpus were *teika* and *sōryō*, terms commonly used by fans who are willing to accept the amount they originally paid for an item and the postage fee in lieu of exchanging goods (e.g., Handme, 2024). Online trading does not remove the monetary barrier to participation in these assistance networks online. A fan either needs the capital to purchase these goods or to already have bought several to exchange with others. However, online trading provides a way to access assistance networks for fans who may not know any other fans of *Yowamushi Pedal* in their day to day lives.

The only one of these collocations to refer to in-person exchange, *tewatashi*, was strongly connected to a term used to denote Tokyo, *tonai*. If one wants to meet in-person, the expectation is that they will be in Tokyo. This reinforces other evidence from my own fieldwork discussed earlier; *Yowamushi Pedal* was a marginal existence in Sendai, and outside of Ikebukuro and Osaka, merchandise for the series was often relatively rare.<sup>54</sup> This extends into fandom, anything beyond an online encounter ideally requires a person to be based within a close distance of Tokyo. While online fandoms can substitute for some elements of this, as was seen in the last chapter with *Hypnosis Mic*'s BL the expectations surrounding queer media by its fandoms by are often restrictive. Queer forms of consumption are reliant on forming connections with other fans, but access to the media mix, the communities that surround it and the possibilities it represents remain limited by one's physical location.

### **Selling Goods**

In late June 2023 a few floors down from the *Chūgai Grace Café* in the MODI shopping centre in Shibuya, a *Yowamushi Pedal* time-limited space was opened— the *Yowamushi Pedal Limit Break: Exceed Our Limits! Exhibit*. I used this as a chance to observe the exhibit at its peak busyness. When I first stopped by in the morning, around a sold-out timeslot, the merchandise section was packed with fans buying goods. I came back later

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<sup>54</sup> There were several weeks when the Animate store in central Sendai stocked no *Yowamushi Pedal* merchandise, for example.

and purchased a walk-in ticket, to which I was met by mild bemusement from the staff, who double checked that I understood this was an exhibit only of *Yowamuchi Pedal* materials. I was handed a randomised fan (*uchiwa*) insert with a character on it. The exhibit itself was short and cheaply constructed, mostly made up of a synopsis of the latest season of the anime adaptation, cardboard cut outs of the characters and, at the end, some animation cells. The primary appeal for fans appeared to be the shop at the end. Alongside exclusive merchandise made for the exhibit, there was a wide variety of goods from various *Yowamushi Pedal* merchandise lines. While waiting in line to purchase a keyring, I overheard the person in front of me spending over 9,000 yen (GBP45) in merchandise, which she put on her credit card as an instalment payment over several months (*bunkatsu barai*).<sup>55</sup> This was not an uncommon scene at *Yowamushi Pedal* events I went to; a relatively pricey event followed by fans spending thousands of yen on merchandise afterwards. The minimum hourly wage in Tokyo at the time was 1,072 yen (GBP5) hourly, and with most attendees at the events I attended appearing to be in their 20s and likely on these lower wages, making these heavy spends stand out. Driving such consumption is the methods by which goods are sold, which are revealing both of how production shapes fandom behaviour, but also how consumers react to and respond to these attempts to monetise their queer desires.

A lot of what drives big purchases is the heavily reliance on what are frequently termed in marketing as tradeable goods. These are goods that are sold blind. In other words, the purchaser is guaranteed a certain type of merchandise, such as a button badge, but not the precise version they may want. In the Japanese context, tradeable goods typically are sold at around the 400-800 yen mark (GBP2-4), and are commonly things like key chains, badges and stickers. The appeal of these goods is comparable to *gachapon* machines, which dispense an unknown item from a set for a few hundred yen, with the consumer encouraged to keep trying to get the one they want (Giard, 2024, p. 24). As the individual purchase price is relatively cheap compared to the cost of larger goods, like acrylic stands with a known character on it, which typically sell for 1,600-2,200 yen (GBP8-11) each, consumers can get several items which then become items they can

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<sup>55</sup> For more popular franchises fans you can see fans spending double or triple this. A friend of mine attended a *Free!* collaboration with multiple fans making purchases that exceeded 20,000 yen.

resell or trade. This focus on randomisation is intensified by the adding of premium items that are only available once the consumer has spent above an arbitrary limit, normally somewhere above 1,000 yen (GBP5). These premiums typically take the form of postcards with a single randomised character on them, which cannot be purchased separately. The more you buy, the higher the chance you then have of getting the character you want, or at the least one that is highly desired by other fans and therefore tradeable. Media mixes are heavily focused on attempting to exploit affective desires towards characters to get them to spend more gambling on getting their *oshi*.

Alongside the above, items are often sold in specific locations, such as collab cafés or pop-up shops, and there is not always a guarantee they will be sold elsewhere later (Steinberg and Ernest dit Alban, 2018, pp. 296–297). This then encourages the trading that was seen in my Twitter data at the Mangaten café and at the entrance of MODI the day of the exhibit. A fan opens a blind good and if they do not get the character, then they can attempt to trade it. Oftentimes, the trade spots are at, or nearby, events for *Yowamushi Pedal*, or in other spaces in key fan locations such as Ikebukuro. At the same time, trades are not guaranteed, so a fan is similarly encouraged to keep purchasing blind bag goods to have a better chance of getting their *oshi*(s). For example, during the yearly merchandise collaboration held at retailer Loft from July to August 2024, one user posted how they were able to get all the goods of their favourite couple “due to exchanging” goods with others (Figure 6.7). Being able to exchange allowed them to get all the goods they needed but would have required them to spend a significant amount to do so as well as be able to attend in-person on a day with many other *Yowamushi Pedal* fans there. Tradeable goods both facilitate fan interaction, but also lock access to the merchandise used in queer fantasies behind a monetary barrier and the ability to travel to in-person events at busy times.

This image has been redacted by the author for privacy reasons.

Figure 6.7: A tweet by a fan who traded for all of the goods featuring their favourite BL coupling at a pop-up shop in the Loft store chain in July 2024.

Additionally, common forms of fan activity (*oshikatsu*) typically make use of multiples of the exact same good. Even if you can trade for one, you may still need several more, so you need goods you are willing to trade or the money to spend to buy the exact one you want.<sup>56</sup> A common example of this is in fandom shrine (*kamidana*), desks and other set-ups where consumers display merchandise of their *oshi* – sometimes numbering in the hundreds. *Ita* bags, discussed in the last chapter, also make use of multiples of the same piece of merchandise. On the birthday of characters, fans will often post images of their collections as if to show off their dedication to their *oshi*. The formation of queer readings of the characters and activities that surround them are connected closely to how heavily one consumes in the media mix. The goods are sold in such a way that encourages both trading and heavy amounts of consumption to get the needed quantity of a piece of merchandise featuring a character.

Fan consumption is further fuelled by numerous limited period promotions and pop-up stores. The earlier mentioned ‘after school snowball fight’ *Yowamushi Pedal* merchandise line was connected to a limited time promotion at popular goods chain

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<sup>56</sup> One fan who had managed to get multiple goods of their *oshi* that I found on X/Twitter declared that this luck was evidently a sign the character “loved” them; perhaps an indication of how unusual such an occurrence is.

Animate in December 2022 during which a customer received a randomised postcard featuring a single character for every 1,100 yen (GBP5.50) they spent. After this period, these postcards were no longer available. Over of my fieldwork I also visited four *Yowamushi Pedal* pop-up shops – three in Tokyo, and one in Osaka – out of the eight held that year. *Yowamushi Pedal* pop-up stores are rare outside of Tokyo and Osaka, making it difficult for fans outside of those cities to go to them. In pop-up stores, the goods themselves would also either become unavailable after the typically month-long promotion, or only available online after a multi-month gap.<sup>57</sup> These limited time stores thus encourage larger purchases and multiple repeat visits if you did not initially get the character you wanted. Fans can mitigate this through extensive trading like the fan in figure 6.7. However, this requires large expenditure to have excess items to trade, or enough money to purchase from other fans. Queer representation in the media mix is closely linked to the consumption of commodities that can facilitate queer fantasies. Access to merchandise that can then be connected to queer fantasies is constrained by money; access to merchandise that can then be connected to queer fantasies is locked behind monetary barriers – your ability to consume. If you lack the financial power (or willingness to budget a large portion of your earnings for merchandise), your access to queerness in the media is more limited.

### **Collab Cafés**

One of the central features of the media mix, which connects the merchandising and fan practices described until now and the queer desires of fans surrounding characters, is the collab café. Short for collaboration cafés, collab cafés are purpose-made spaces for the sale of limited-time food or drink items themed around a character or franchise. Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited four *Yowamushi Pedal* collab cafés of the seven held between September 2022-September 2023.<sup>58</sup> The purchase price for these food or drink items will typically include a premium, typically a drink mat or postcard, with exclusive merchandise also available for purchase. The ‘theming’ of the café spaces themselves is typically achieved through posters or tapestries of the characters hung on the walls and a

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<sup>57</sup> The example from Loft in the previous paragraph, for example, does not make it clear how long the wait for online sales will be, with the website only stating that they will be available at an unspecified point in the future (TMS Shop, no date).

<sup>58</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, I also attended a further seven collab cafés for other series in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya during my fieldwork.

constant stream of music or promotional videos from the series. At the Chūgai Grace Café from the introduction this was a television screen playing the same 90-second promotional video for *Yowamushi Pedal* on repeat for 80 minutes. The blandness of the space and simplicity of the decorations makes it easy to switch between different series rapidly, running cafés for periods of a couple of weeks to multiple months. Most collab cafés require reservations and have time limits on their use, typically 70-90 minutes with a last order time 10-20 minutes earlier. Consumers are expected to order food/drink and buy merchandise within this time, and the busier the café, the more regimented this experience can become. You can never spend time in the café exactly according to your desires as you will always be interrupted and moved on when time is up.

Collab cafés emerged in 2012 with an Animate café on *Otome* Road in the former Animate flagship building and are an outcrop of what are known as concept cafés, or *konkafe*, spaces that focus on experiences and services around a specific theme. The most famous of *konkafe* is the maid café. As discussed in the last chapter, maid cafés are purpose-built spaces that facilitate affective connections between the customers and female staff members dressed as maid characters that bridge between the 2D and 3D worlds (Galbraith, 2019, p. 192). However, instead of creating a connection with a particular maid or butler character, instead as the head of the original Animate café explains, the aim is to “enjoy a space specialised to a specific product, eat in that space and shop” (Ishibashi *et al.*, 2022b). Collab cafés offer a chance to engross oneself in a series’ *sekaikan* and spend time interacting with the 2D characters of these worlds, facilitating further chances for affective encounters, with plenty of opportunities to spend money while doing so.

Consumer actions ultimately determine whether these spaces are places for shopping, socialising, building queer fantasies or a combination of the three. Beyond the minimum requirements of ordering at least one item, there is nothing forcing a consumer to constantly spend money or order more food or drinks. A common sight at all the *Yowamushi Pedal* cafés I attended was consumers ordering a food item and a drink, and then using their remaining allocated time to set up a large collection of merchandise around their order and take photographs. These photos are in some cases then uploaded onto social media. For these consumers, the café is functionally a space to go on a date with their *oshi*, in a space that is located within the worldview of the franchise. After

finally eating their food (and often also purchasing further exclusive merchandise), fans would often look for the tapestry, poster or another image of their *oshi* to take a photograph with. Figure 6.8 shows an example of this at the *Chūgai Grace Café*, where I witnessed a staff member even letting a customer past the barrier to get a better picture. The experience of this fan, and the many like it I saw at collab cafés for *Yowamushi Pedal*, was guided by their own narrative surrounding the character and the queer possibilities they represent.



Figure 6.8: An example of a large poster decorating the Chūgai Grace Café Yowamushi Pedal café. Photo by author.

The menus reflect not just popular characters among fans (whether they are relevant to the current narrative of the manga), but also same-sex couplings. The menu of the Chūgai Grace Café for example had three food dishes – two of which match the most popular same-sex couplings amongst fans. The relationship between the dish and the coupling is further visible when you receive the dish itself, with a stake placed in the sandwich showing the pair each holding one of the items making up the dish. I witnessed at least one fan wiping down and taking this stake away with them; it was not just seen as disposable but treated as if it too were another piece of merchandise. The design of the dish itself is a facilitator of the queer fantasies of the consumer. These collab cafés may be designed to monetise and exploit the usage of *Yowamushi Pedal* for the creation of queer narratives by fans, but the actual way they are used is constructed by the consumers themselves.

Different cafés can also appeal to slightly different fantasies and forms of behaviour. At the Mangaten café in Ikebukuro I visited in October 2022, much of the space was covered in cardboard stands of the characters. This included cut outs of two characters who are popularly coupled with each other Makishima Yūsuke and Tōdō Jinpachi. Makishima had a stand with his arm extended out, allowing customers to take pictures as if he were hugging them, something I observed several customers doing. Next to the Tōdō cut-out was a small table, on which I saw multiple customers putting Makishima merchandise and taking pictures of Tōdō and Makishima together. Consumption and production are both central to how collab cafés function. Consumers produce meaning through their interactions with the space and usage of merchandise within it, while production seeks to exploit the affective desire of fans through the design and set-up of the space and the production of merchandise for purchase and exchange.

The final crucial element to the collab café experience is the premium items provided with each food/drink order and how they encourage repeat visits by fans. There are roughly 21 characters that appear frequently in merchandising for *Yowamushi Pedal* and many of them are represented on the premiums available at these cafés. As these premiums are distributed randomly, it is unlikely that fans get the character that they want, requiring ordering many dishes and drinks to increase their chances. This likely explains a common behaviour of fans at most cafés I visited; ordering a huge number of dishes with little apparent care for the character(s) they are connected to. The premiums available with food/drink orders are also often separated into two different groups depending on the date. Visiting on or near a character's birthday could also mean additional premiums exclusive to the days surrounding it. Items are not very cheap either, typically being around 700-800 yen per drink (roughly £3.50-4) and 1,400-1,600 yen per food item (£7-8). In my fieldwork I frequently saw some customers spending several thousand yen on food or drinks, before the purchase of any exclusive goods, a significant amount for the younger target demographic.<sup>59</sup> The spaces take the logic of spending on merchandise at fairs and pop-up shops and place you in a space where you have a time

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<sup>59</sup> While none of the *Yowamushi Pedal* cafés did, many collab cafés will provide additional premiums when spending over a certain amount (for example a tissue pack with a themed cover for every 2,000 yen at a collab café for the comedy manga *The Vampire Dies in No Time* I attended on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2023).



limit to order as much as possible and get as many premiums as possible to increase your chances of getting your *oshi*, or *oshi kapu*.

Collab cafés – such as those associated with *Yowamushi Pedal* – stand as a useful example of how queerness, consumption and media mixes are connected to each other through merchandising. They provide specialised space for the goods, seemingly partly designed to facilitate queer narratives, and the creation of fantasies with them through date-like, or shrine-like (*kamidana*), set-ups. As semi-public spaces, collab cafés also facilitate exchange and interaction between fans (Giard, 2024, p. 26). Finally, they mimic the sales techniques seen in pop-up stores, mixing limited-time windows with a liminal space in which one can physically enter the world of the character and experience their fantasies within that space. Collab cafés both highlight how queerness becomes *contents*, and that the *contents* that are created from *Yowamushi Pedal* and within these spaces reflect fan desires. To access queerness in the media mix, consumption of large amounts of merchandise and attending spaces where that merchandise is sold is necessary. Queerness is represented through the merchandising of *Yowamushi Pedal* but is locked behind extensive participation in the media mix and an understanding of the fandom practices that underpin it.

### **Other Paratexts: Beyond Merchandise**

A week after I attended the Mangaten exhibit and café in October 2023, a livestreamed interview was held there with the author of *Yowamushi Pedal*, Watanabe Wataru. After a brief discussion with the interviewer on stage, the rest of the stream saw Watanabe answering questions submitted online and a couple from the small in-person audience. The Q&A started with a question about the university departments certain characters attend after graduating high school. After this, the focus of the questions narrowed even further. At one point, Watanabe began talking about the exact time of day a flight departed carrying one character on his move to the UK, and then described how that same character struggles with Britain's hard water. Watanabe outlined which characters are popular on social media and at another point how one character uses TikTok.<sup>60</sup> Accounts of similar events by other fans on social media (especially on X/Twitter) report similarly narrow questions, such as what a pair of characters do in their alone time or where a character

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<sup>60</sup> This is anachronistic in the context of the series as it is set between 2008-2010.

would take them on a date. In these interviews, Watanabe provides new, and oftentimes highly specific, fragments of the lives of characters that can be connected into fan fantasies surrounding them. Knowing about a character's struggles abroad can help in writing fanfiction about them. Information about a preferred date or location can drive *yumejoshi* activities. Watanabe's interviews act as a source of information, and as an official source providing fuel for the queer fantasies of fans as expressed in things like *dōjinshi*.

These interviews form a part of the media mix that can include a range of paratextual activities, also including spin-off manga, novels and movies. These can also encourage queer readings of the original text and its *sekaikan*. To demonstrate this, I focus on the most popular pair in the series, who I have mentioned earlier – Makishima and Tōdō, referred to as *Tōmaki* by fans – and how their relationship is handled in these paratexts.<sup>61</sup> *Tōmaki* are rivals and in the original manga their race during the first year in-series serves as a climactic moment for both characters (Watanabe, 2008-present; *Otomedial*, 2014a; *Shūkan shōnen champion henshūbu*, 2015; Takahashi, 2015). As with the Kyoto Animation examples discussed in chapter four, *Yowamushi Pedal* carries a queer subtext that is supported by the marketing of the series but never made explicit. A homosocial reading of them as rivals remains possible. However, side narratives and interviews hint at the possibility there is more to their relationship than rivalry and friendship.

One of the most prominent examples of how the series hints at queer subtext can be seen in a motif of the pair talking on the phone to each other. Shown only in passing in the original manga, paratextual materials and merchandise make extensive use of this imagery (for example, Figure 6.9). Fan materials further deploy this in a variety of ways from X/Twitter posts making up phone conversations between the pair, to *dōjinshi* discussing how the phone structures their relationship (Figure 6.10). Queer readings of their relationship are also leant into in official works such as the anime adaptation of *Yowamushi Pedal* (2013–2023). In contrast to the manga, where Tōdō appears initially as a flirt with girls, in the anime he is introduced in a scene where he is on the phone to

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<sup>61</sup> This is an amalgamation of the first character of Tōdō and Makishima. The ordering here indicates that sexually speaking, Tōdō is the top or *seme*, while Makishima is the bottom or *uke*.

Makishima (Watanabe, 2008-present, chap. 65; ‘Imaizumi to Naruko no 1000km’, 2014). His enthusiastic conversation is overheard by another club member who mistakes “Maki-chan” (Tōdō’s nickname for Makishima) for a female admirer – something that he does not deny. Tying him to Makishima through this phone conversation provides further fuel for fans to create narratives that queer their relationship. The image of them speaking on the phone hints at the relationship they possibly have beyond the text itself, providing a vector for queer fantasies surrounding the characters.



Figure 6.9: Example of merchandise using the motif of Tōdō (left) and Makishima (right) on the phone to each other. Photo by author.

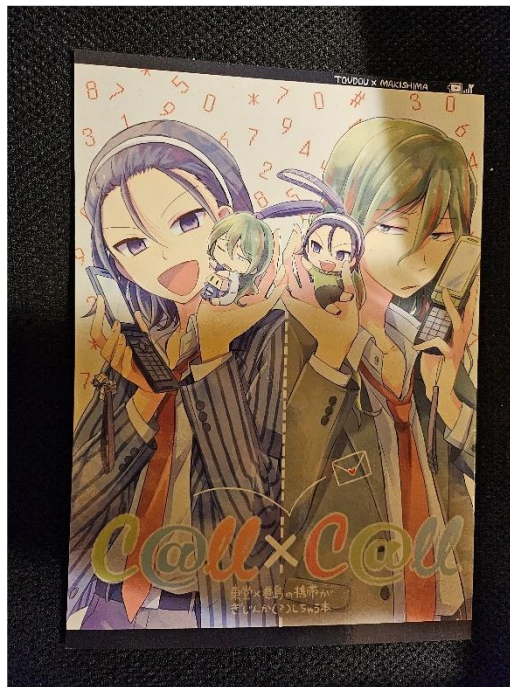


Figure 6.10: An example of a BL dōjinshi that features the phone motif. Photo by author.

The encouragement of these queer fantasies extends into original spin-off works, such as the feature film movie – *Yowamushi Pedal the Movie* (2015). While ostensibly the film focuses on the connection between Makishima and the main character Onoda, in practice just as much emphasis is placed on Makishima and Tōdō in the movie and marketing (Naganuma, 2015b, p. 28; Tōhō Sutura, 2015, pp. 4–7). The director, Naganuma, describes in one interview how the movie will allow fans to see what he describes as Tōdō and Makishima’s “irreplaceable relationship” (*kakagae no nai*), wording that in Japanese can also be used to have romantic implications (Naganuma, 2015a, pp. 106–107). A major plot point of the movie is Makishima’s absence for much of it, with a description in major anime/manga magazine *Animage* describing Tōdō’s disappointment at the lack of opportunity not only to race him, but also to go sightseeing and dining together (*Animage*, 2015, p. 23). Tōdō’s longing for these common dating practices further fuels the fantasies of fans of *Tōmaki*.

The Tōdō and Makishima dynamic is far from the only example of similar marketing in the *Yowamushi Pedal*’s media mix that represents the characters in ways that can be read as homoerotic. Examples also exist of other official sources supporting queer readings of the pair’s relationship. The main spin-off manga for the series,

*Yowamushi Pedal Spare Bike* (2014-present), has continued to follow their relationship after they graduated from high school and has multiple chapters dedicated to building-up their relationship. Volume 8 of *Spare Bike* is particularly illustrative of this – featuring Makishima making an expensive day trip to a festival in Hakone to tell Tōdō that he will be studying abroad (Watanabe, 2014-present, vol. 8).<sup>62</sup> The set-up of the scene feels almost akin to a break-up, with Makishima telling Tōdō as fireworks are set-off in the background and Tōdō is left crying in response (Watanabe, 2014-present, vol. 8, pp. 96-117). In subsequent chapters, Tōdō picked his university on the basis of it having an exchange program with Makishima’s British one, and a major plot point is the pair eventually reuniting. The tone of this has not gone unnoticed by fans – in the years since 2020 several fans have commented on X/Twitter about how blatant the romantic undertone of *Spare Bike* is. That these narratives come from official sources, such as directors or write-ups in magazines such as *Animage* promoting the series serves to add legitimacy to the queer reading. The more that fans interact with the media mix, the more chances they have to encounter these fragments that can be connected into wider queer narratives. Access to queer representation is closely tied to consumption and the ability of a fan to spend time and money on interacting with the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*. Queer representations become the *contents* that the consumer is seeking through the media mix, supported by the practices of the stakeholders in how they design merchandise, events and talk about the series.

### **Queer Representation and the Media Mix: From *Yowamushi Pedal* to *Blue Lock***

During my fieldwork, another sports manga series, *Blue Lock* (2018-present), began to rapidly spike in popularity along with an anime adaptation that began airing in October 2022 on TV Asahi. The series, written by Kaneshiro Muneyuki and illustrated by Nomura Yūsuke, follows the protagonist Isagi Yōichi after he is recruited onto a youth football training program in an institute seeking to develop the greatest Japanese striker. With its release timed for the lead up to the real-life football World Cup, the anime adaptation propelled the already successful series to stratospheric levels. During the World Cup in December 2022, the manga sold 2,000,000 copies of its various volumes in just two weeks,

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<sup>62</sup> This moment has been turned into merchandise during a *Spare Bike* merchandise event at Animate. A poster depicting the panels was one the first items to sell-out at the Sendai Animate.

adding onto its already significant 13,000,000 total sales. As of April 2024, the manga remains one the best-selling in Japan, having topped 30,000,000 overall volumes sold, placing it in-line with *Yowamushi Pedal*'s overall sales figures after fifteen years of serialisation (Kodansha, 2024; Weekly\_Champion, 2024). Surrounding the manga was a substantial media mix, with merchandise stands for the series taking over nearly every anime/manga store I visited across Japan. At the core of this marketing is several key similarities with *Yowamushi Pedal* and one key difference: queerness is far more explicit in *Blue Lock*.

Characters in the manga frequently make thinly veiled innuendos or outright sexual or romantic statements, such as declaring their love for one another, or asking for another player's telephone number while describing themselves as turned on while playing. Another chapter directly references in-universe that the most popular same-sex coupling is trending on social media (Kaneshiro and Nomura, 2018-present, chap. 241). As noted in the previous chapter, these couple names have historically been created by fans to shield their fantasies from being easily linked to the manga, but this reference is a clear sign that producers are aware of these fans and their practices. *Blue Lock* goes much further than the examples discussed so far, in not simply flirting with homoeroticism. Despite this, there are no officially declared couples, so much as with *Yowamushi Pedal*, it is possible for readers to overlook the homoerotic undertones. *Blue Lock* also exploits multiple forms of fan affect, whether interested in the relationship between characters or with characters while also maintaining an audience uninterested in such readings of the series.

Merchandising further exploits this, with heart-shaped badges on sale featuring a pair of characters that match popular same-sex couplings (Figure 6.11). Goods focused on singular characters will often have functions that can connect them with other characters in the same line if desired, or just used as standalones. Stores even sold starter sets for *oshikatsu*, selling several badges with a single character in a bundled set. For one of the most popular characters, himself in a popular coupling, a spin-off manga is currently being serialised that received an anime film adaptation in April 2024. *Blue Lock* and its merchandising are blatant in its catering to the queer desires of the fandom. Within just a year, *Blue Lock* seems to have built an empire of plastic merchandise, sold primarily

to female consumers, focused on the characters affective potentials and the queer narratives that can be formed with or around them.



Figure 6.11: Merchandise for Blue Lock, with heart-shaped badges visible on the left on the shelf. Photo taken by author in July 2023.

*Blue Lock* goes a step further than anything I experienced in researching the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*, only stopping barely short of outright confirmation of some couplings. The massive popularity of *Blue Lock* seems to only confirm the potential of its approach. More broadly, the success of *Blue Lock*'s media mix reflects the transformations in the Japanese media sphere surrounding the representation of sexuality and gender. While *Yowamushi Pedal* was in both its narrative and structure a reflection of a media sphere that was heavily focused on gender and (especially male) otaku, *Blue Lock* is a reflection of one that is focused on sexuality and has seen a boom in BL. A greater focus on queer sexuality can also be seen in other manga by *Blue Lock* author Kaneshiro - his previous manga *As the Gods Will* (2011-2016) featured a multiple-page male same-sex kiss. *Blue Lock* and its media mix reflect not only a greater focus on sexuality, but also a willingness by authors like Kaneshiro to be more explicit in the depiction of same-sex attraction. The media mix represents and makes *contents* from characters in a way that reflects the cultural moment within which it emerges, and the popularity of *Blue Lock* suggests that the cultural moment in Japan has shifted.



Both *Yowamushi Pedal* and *Blue Lock* are useful in reflecting on the shifting ways in which queerness is represented and understood in the Japanese media and specifically its marketing. As has been seen in previous chapters, the media mix of these works seek to strike a balance between different readings of the relationships between the characters, who can be understood as having either intense homoerotic or homosocial relationships. This balance – as I have argued in this chapter – is at least partially about facilitating different forms of queer fantasy. The characters on the merchandise I discussed in this chapter can be read in a variety of ways, either as looking towards the consumer, or as being with another character. The art on merchandise for *Yowamushi Pedal* allows for both readings to be possible for the consumer and the merchandise to be appealing to the widest possible audience. A character can be sold not only to *fujoshi* and their same-sex romantic fantasies, but also to *yumejoshi* who have fantasies that may be heterosexual in desire but queer in how they turn away from ‘normal,’ real romance. For the latter group, the characters not being explicitly in a relationship better facilitates their own fantasies as there is no competition in-series for their affection.

The design and sale of merchandise and other paratexts in the media mix also connects into the way that fandom organises itself, connected through networks of exchange and comradeship over queer fantasies surrounding the same series. While they may have sometimes conflicting or differing interpretations of the relationships between characters, fans are ultimately purchasing the same merchandise, books and broader world. This consumer-level organisation then has an impact on the way that production monetises the media mix. The design of spaces such as collab cafés is structured around the existence not only of communities surrounding the series, but also in reflecting what queer narratives those groups are most interested in. Queer narratives in the media mix, much as they helped foster a space like Ikebukuro, are also crucial to the formulation of fandom communities surrounding series like *Yowamushi Pedal*.

Queerness, then, acts as *contents* to be consumed. The lack of explicitness is significant here – get more fragments to be placed into a broader queer reading of a character and their relationships, consumers need to continue to participate within the media mix. At the same time, what is being turned into contents is fundamentally a reflection of the fandom itself. The fantasies surrounding characters such as Makishima and Tōdō did not come from a top-down imposition by production, it was born of fans



creating queer readings of the characters in the original work. There is a close relationship between consumption and production in the media mix, one in which both are constantly influencing and shaping each other. This relationship however ultimately serves to continue to reinforce the power of production in monetising and exploiting the queer narratives that can be read from the characters. Behind representation in the media mix is an association by stakeholders between queerness and *contents*.

As *Blue Lock* suggests however, there does appear to be shifts occurring that may suggest a changing approach to queerness in media marketing. When contrasted with the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*, the approach of *Blue Lock* suggests a shift in-line with the current cultural moment, one that has seen a growth of LGBTQ+ imagery and BL narratives. *Blue Lock* is a work more in-line with the approach of the media to queerness amidst the LGBT Boom. *Yowamushi Pedal*, while targeting a similar audience, represents an approach that is potentially being supplanted as the queer subtext in these works begins to become more explicit.

For both series however, the media mix highlights how queerness is intrinsically tied to and treated as a form of *contents*. It points to how consumption is connected to discourses surrounding sexuality and gender through marketing that seeks to monetise queer desires. Merchandise is important as it represents a chance to further extend one's queer fantasies based on what its design signifies about a character and their relationships. Consumers are not completely at the whims of production but do interact with this marketing and form communities surrounding the queer possibilities within and achieving access to them. These communities mitigate the barriers created by the need for heavy monetary investment in the media mix and being easily able to commute into Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya. Queerness in the Japanese media is turned into *contents* to both reflect fan desires for something that breaks with cisheteronormative reality, but also the aims of producers to exploit that for monetary gain. In the next chapter, I will turn to the broadcaster behind *Blue Lock*, TV Asahi, to take a closer look at how the link between representation, queerness and *contents* is defined on a production level.

## 7. Production: Television Broadcasting and TV Asahi

While studying abroad in Nagoya in April 2018, I returned to my host family's house one evening to find them watching a live action drama featuring two male characters getting very intimate with one another. When, after a few minutes, I asked what they were watching I got the rather blunt response of "it's one of the BL [Boys Love] you like" (followed by a debate as to whether my research meant I liked BL or not). The show in question was *Ossan's Love* (2018-2024), an unexpected hit for the broadcaster TV Asahi that aired on Saturday evenings in Spring 2018. The show depicts a love triangle at a real estate company between the main character and two of his co-workers, one his older boss and the other his younger co-worker and roommate. The show set the record for highest physical DVD sales in TV Asahi's history, and has since 2018 received two further seasons, a movie, a Cantonese version, a spin-off manga and an in person exhibitions amongst other things (TV Asahi, 2020b, p. 114). The show also fuelled an ongoing boom in male same-sex romance dramas in Japan, with every major broadcaster having made and aired at least one example of the genre as of 2024. This BL drama boom forms one part of the LGBT boom and is a prominent example of the role of male-male romantic representations within it. No longer simply found in specialist BL sections of bookstores or the occasional anime adaptation, male-male romance in live-action has become a major part of the Japanese broadcasting landscape.

At the same time, these dramas are reflective of what forms of queerness have become dominant during the LGBT Boom, in which depictions of female same-sex relationships or gender minorities remain relatively fringe as male homoeroticism dominates. These dramas also reflect the broadcasting world's attempts to retain viewers who are increasingly switching to on-demand, internet streaming, encapsulated by the phrase "*terebi banare*" (separation from television) (Tse, 2024). In developing media mixes and encouraging viral trends online broadcasters seek to bring people back to television through queerness. As the anecdotal example from my host family suggests, even for those not typically drawn to BL media, the buzz surrounding *Ossan's Love* was enough to entice them to watch.

This chapter provides a case study of one broadcaster, the producer of *Ossan's Love*, TV Asahi and the wider network of television stations that air its programmes,

known as the All-Nippon News Network (ANN). Beyond its role in the wider BL drama boom, TV Asahi holds a connection to many of the works discussed in this thesis. Discussed briefly in the survey chapter, *Yuri!!! On Ice* was a late-night anime originally aired on TV Asahi. The Kyoto Animation works were both funded by the Osaka affiliate of the ANN network. The anime for *Blue Lock*, discussed in the conclusion of the last chapter, aired on TV Asahi. Focusing on this prominent broadcaster, then, provides an opportunity to explore recent trends.

I analyse TV Asahi through the production process of the Circuit of Culture. In the introduction to the textbook on production in the Circuit of Culture, du Gay (1997, p. 5) argues that production can be looked at as a process that seeks to connect “goods and services with particular cultural meanings” and influence the values that are associated with the company. In short, production is a process that seeks to control the dissemination of cultural meanings and directly influence the other processes in the Circuit of Culture through doing so. As such, I have chosen to look at production last to highlight how the process links to what we have seen until now in this thesis. This chapter argues that TV Asahi has sought to create an association between the company and support for certain pro-LGBTQ+ policies through the ways it approaches queer representation. For TV Asahi, queerness is crucial in the creation of *contents*, cultural commodities that can then drive consumption within the broadcaster’s ecosystem (du Gay, 1997, p. 7; Steinberg, 2019, p. 65). As consumers must go through the TV Asahi ecosystem to access certain queer representations, the company can then regulate the ways that consumption occurs within these spaces they control. Consumers are not passive however, and as we saw in the previous chapter produce meanings from the texts that they consume (Mackay, 1997, p. 11). While TV Asahi may seek to influence the signification of meaning in its texts, the company is unable to assert total control. This chapter thus considers production from two perspectives – both how TV Asahi seeks to assert control over the representation of queerness and turn it into a source for *contents* and how consumers understand and contest these representations.

In this chapter, after a brief introduction to broadcasting in Japan and the history of TV Asahi, I focus on three types of output by the company: live action dramas, anime and news-related programming. Each of these will be discussed with reference to the arguments made in each preceding chapter about how queerness in the Japanese media

works within the Circuit of Culture model. For live action works, the focus will be on *Ossan's Love*, the Boys' Love (BL) drama boom and TV Asahi's role in promoting Thai BL works since 2020, discussing the intersections between *contents*, media mixing and space. Next, I turn to anime, discussing the legacy of 2016 anime *Yuri!!! On Ice* and similar shows produced since, drawing comparisons to chapter four and Kyoto Animation. Finally, the non-fiction output of ANN and Abema connects contemporary queer issues with chapter three focus on popular opinion and the politics surrounding same-sex marriage and transgender rights. Queer representation at TV Asahi reflects many of the key themes of this thesis: the heavy focus on gay male representation as a source of *contents* that is lucrative, in this case, by drawing people back to television. Queerness is central to how TV Asahi produces *contents* that seeks to drive media mixes based on their works. The centrality of queerness to TV Asahi's output suggests that queerness is not simply a niche limited to specific genres. At the same time, a divide seems to be growing, as broadcasters fail to provide queer representation that goes as far as some consumers want, and in a backlash against sexual minorities and gender minorities in Japan.

### **Television Broadcasting in Japan**

Mass television broadcasting in Japan begun in the 1950s, with the first television licenses being issued in 1951 to the privately owned Nippon Television (NTV) and to the publicly owned Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK) in 1952, with the first broadcasts in 1953. For commercial stations, television licences were closely regulated. Private broadcasting licenses were granted based on location and never to the same corporation across multiple prefectures (Itō *et al.*, 2011; Koga-Browes, 2012).<sup>63</sup> To get around these restrictions, broadcasters created networks of channels across Japan, centred on a major station (*kii kyoku*) in Tokyo, with close links to newspaper companies (Chun, 2007, p. 99; Tse, 2024, p. 102).<sup>64</sup> For example, TV Asahi does not broadcast directly to Sendai, instead its local affiliate *Higashi Nippon hōsō* (khh) airs much of its programming. Presently there are

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<sup>63</sup> In the wake of the digital switchover and the 2008 financial crisis, the risk of local stations being unable to afford the growing costs led to these rules being changed to allow a higher percentage of ownership by a single company.

<sup>64</sup> Many of these networks also have a secondary major station (*jun kii kyoku*) based in Osaka or Nagoya that, while not as strong as the Tokyo-based station, maintain a greater level of autonomy.

five major networks, though none of them cover every prefecture.<sup>65</sup> Despite the network system technically enabling local control over broadcasting, in practice it does little to change the dominance of Tokyo where most of the *kii kyoku* are located.

By contrast there are less stringent regulations on the content of broadcasts. The Broadcasting Law (*Hōsō hō*) contains four regulations: that broadcasts do not disturb public safety (*kōan*) or good morals; that they are politically fair; that they will not distort the truth and that they will show arguments from multiple perspectives (*Hōsō hō*, 1950; Chun, 2007, p. 158; Murakami, 2016, p. 9). The regulations set out in the Broadcasting Law are enforced directly by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (*Sōmushō*) whose punishments are relatively light (Murakami, 2016, pp. 12, 15). There is no independent regulator in Japan with the legal power to punish broadcasters that break these regulations. Instead, there is a much stronger focus on self-regulation in the broadcasting industry, with the commercial broadcasters following the rules set by the *Minkan hōsō renmei* (The Japan Commercial Broadcasters Association) (Murakami, 2016, p. 49). Broadcasting has light direct regulation, but more stringent, and opaque, self-regulation of what is depicted and discussed on air.

On a societal level, television has held a central role in the shaping of Japanese society since the 1950s. Yoshimi (2003, 2014, p. 137) argues that television has been crucial in creating “national time” in postwar Japan, acting as the “moment of organization” for postwar social and family life structured around the television screen. For example, by bringing together the family during peak timeslots such as the so-called “golden time” between 7-10pm (Chun, 2007, p. 84; Yoshimi, 2014, p. 137). Through the television screen, one could “experience” (*taiken*) society and politics from their home and with their family (Usui, 1998, p. 22). The television set shaped the way that people both structure their time and experience the world around them. As such, broadcasting has played an important role in defining how people experienced the world around them.

An example of the importance of television to how people experience and understand society can be seen in its relationship with politics in Japan. Soft news programs, a form of reporting focused on lighter stories about daily life and celebrities

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<sup>65</sup> These networks are All-Nippon News Network (ANN) and the *Asahi Shimbun*; the Nippon News Network (NNN) and the *Yomiuri Shimbun*; the Japan News Network (JNN) and the *Mainichi Shimbun*; the Fuji News Network (FNN) and the *Sankei Shimbun*; and the TXN Network and the *Nikkei Shimbun*.

rather than ‘hard’ news such as political tussles, are prominent in Japan (Baum, 2003, pp. 16–17; Taniguchi, 2011; Ōmori, 2023). A popular form of soft news programming in Japan is the wide show format, a type of talk show bringing together celebrities, news anchors and sometimes politicians. When politicians appear on these shows they deemphasise their actual policy positions, putting a greater focus on their personality (Taniguchi, 2007, 2011).<sup>66</sup> Appearances on soft news programs can influence voters. For example Taniguchi (2011, pp. 73–74) found voters in the in the 2007 Upper House elections, in which the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost nearly 50% of their seats, were more likely to vote for politicians from the LDP that appeared on soft news programs. Broadcasters are key then to how people have related to politics over several decades.

The rise of online streaming and platforms such as Nico-Nico Douga and YouTube however represent a challenge to the dominance of television and how it shapes Japanese society. This has led to a growing discourse surrounding *terebi banare*, (lit. departure from television) in the industry and academia over a decrease in the viewership of live broadcast television in favour of the internet and social media (Tse, 2024). The departure from television is particularly visible amongst those in their mid-teens to late 20s, who watch significantly less live television than other generations (Hotaka and Funakoshi, 2023, p. 6). For example, in a survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 64% of people in their 20s watched live television in 2020 while the equivalent figure for groups over 40 all exceeded 80% (Sōmushō, 2021, p. 336). Public broadcaster the NHK found similar results with just 51% in their twenties watching live broadcast television in 2022 (Hotaka and Funakoshi, 2023). In my survey, 54.26% of respondents in aged 18-24 reported watching less than one hour a day of broadcast television on average. In contrast, the equivalent figure for respondents over 65 was 14.84%. Younger audiences seem to be leaving live broadcast television behind. However, as Tse (2024, p. 114) notes, we need to question what “television” they are departing from. What is produced by broadcasters in Japan is not limited to broadcast television but is visible across a diverse range of platforms and mediums from streaming services to in-

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<sup>66</sup> In a British context, an example would be Boris Johnson garnering great exposure through repeated appearances both hosting and appearing as a guest on the current affairs panel show *Have I Got News for You* in the 2000s.

person events. While people may not be watching their television sets, they are never too far removed from the major broadcasters and the discourses produced on “television.” The continued importance of television in Japan, and how broadcasters sought to mitigate *terebi banare*, is strongly visible looking at commercial broadcaster TV Asahi and ANN, and how they have depicted, and monetised, queerness over the last fourteen years.

### **TV Asahi and ANN – A Brief History**

In the late 1950s, television came under heavy scrutiny for its perceived lack of educational value. One of television’s strongest critics was Ōya Sōichi, an influential academic, who wrote in 1957 about his fears that television would turn Japan into a “nation of 100 million idiots” (Chun, 2007, pp. 160–161). For Ōya, Japanese television was dominated by shows that focused on drawing audiences through the shock value of their broadcasts, rather than producing shows that could provide cultural and educational enrichment to audiences (Chun, 2007, pp. 164–165). Contemporary to Ōya’s critiques of television was the start of a moral panic over the effect of television on children, as media outlets drew attention to how televisual violence could distract children from studying and teach them violent behaviours (Chun, 2007, pp. 179–180). In response to these criticisms of television, the Japanese government began distributing restrictive educational licences that required stations under it to have their output be at least 50% educational and 30% cultural programming (Chun, 2007, p. 187; Murakami, 2016). These licenses sought to regulate the production of television by restricting what types of television could be made as commercial stations under the educational license would have to produce shows that were culturally and educationally enriching. In practice however, commercial broadcasters would quickly start looking for loopholes in these stipulations.

One of these educational licenses was granted in 1958 to *Nippon kyōiku terebi* (NET) which, headed by the president of major film company Tōei, began airing in the Tokyo region in 1959 (Chun, 2007, p. 187; TV Asahi, 2010; Serizawa and Wakamatsu, 2016, p. 90). NET aired a variety of dramas backed by Tōei, news programs led by the *Asahi Shimbun* and pioneered the now ubiquitous wide show format, talk shows focusing on current affairs featuring participants ranging from news anchors to celebrities (Zenkoku asahi hōsō, 1984, p. 79; Chun, 2007; Taniguchi, 2007). Educational television was not profitable, however. NET had significant financial issues as the channel struggled to attract sponsors and had weak ratings at peak viewing times (Zenkoku asahi hōsō, 1984,

p. 54; TV Asahi, 2010, pp. 177–178). To meet the requirements of the educational licence while turning a profit, in the early 1960s NET imported several westerns from America claiming that they were historical and thus counted as educational (Zenkoku asahi hōsō, 1984, pp. 54–55; Chun, 2007, p. 189). The government created the educational licenses in response to the then growing criticisms of television, but did not provide any support, financial or otherwise, to the stations under the license. This lack of support from the government incentivised NET to shift to broadcasting shows that were educational in name only to make money. The educational license would eventually be abolished in 1973, with NET having their license converted to a regular broadcasting one without any special restrictions (Zenkoku asahi hōsō, 1984, pp. 200–201). After a large purchase of stocks by the *Asahi Shimbun* in 1973, NET would then rebrand in 1977 to TV Asahi (Zenkoku asahi hōsō, 1984, pp. 200-205, 240).

For much of its history, and especially after the purchase of stocks in the 1970s, the station has maintained a close connection to the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of the largest newspapers in Japan. Perhaps reflecting this connection, TV Asahi, while ostensibly politically neutral, does tend to reflect the liberal sympathies of the *Asahi Shimbun* (Kaneko, Asano and Miwa, 2021). TV Asahi has gotten in trouble with the government for breaking neutrality guidelines on multiple occasions for bias against the conservative LDP (Murakami, 2016, pp. 225-230). One illustrative example in 1993 saw the broadcasting chief of the company accused of pushing an anti-LDP line in the station's reporting, leading to his resignation and a warning from the government (TV Asahi, 2010, p. 241; Murakami, 2016). While it would be too far to refer to TV Asahi (and ANN) as left-wing, it does seem that the company holds sympathy to positions that oppose the conservative LDP which, as I will show later, is visible in its coverage of issues such as same-sex marriage.

TV Asahi's programming outside of the Kantō region is distributed through ANN, which was set-up in 1970. ANN covers most of Japan with 26 affiliated companies, only lacking a direct partner in six broadcasting regions.<sup>67</sup> Within the ANN network the Osaka-based affiliate, the Asahi Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), is the secondary major station

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<sup>67</sup> These regions are Yamanashi, Toyama, Tottori-Shimane, Tokushima, Kōchi and Saga.



on the network, with a significant level of independence and power.<sup>68</sup> TV Asahi also holds a 50% stake in both online broadcaster Abema and on-demand streaming service Telasa. Both ANN (as well as several networks within it) and TV Asahi are controlled by TV Asahi Holdings, whose primary shareholders are the *Asahi Shimbun* and media conglomerate Tōei. While ANN is meant to provide a voice to local stations across Japan, in practice Tokyo and, to a lesser extent, Osaka and the corporations based in those cities dominate the output of the network across Japan.

TV Asahi's current corporate strategy is referred to as "Asahi 360," reflecting how the company's production covers almost all facets of the media sphere (TV Asahi Holdings, 2020). TV Asahi Holdings (2020, 2023a) frames itself as a producer of "*contents*," with the key phrase of their current corporate plan being that "*contents* is the source of all value." For the company, everything is connected into the need to produce not only television shows, but goods, movies, brand tie-ins and even physical exhibitions out of what they produce. In other words, good *contents* drive the creation of media mixes that draw people into constant interaction with the broadcaster through various outlets, whether that involves watching television or not. The importance of *contents* holds true for queer representations as well, even as they may hold socio-political value, they must also draw people back to the broadcaster's ecosystem, back to television. From the perspective of production, there is a need to connect *contents* and queerness – something done to great effect by TV Asahi with the broadcast of *Ossan's Love* in 2018.

### ***Ossan's Love* – Media Mixing Queer Representation**

As mentioned in the introduction, since around 2018 there has been a notable boom in live action male-male romance, or Boys Love (BL), dramas produced in Japan (Wakamatsu, 2023; Kubo, 2024, pp. 170–171).<sup>69</sup> One of the works that started this boom was *Ossan's Love*, with which I opened this chapter and from which an image was used in the survey in chapter three (Fujimoto, 2019; Wakamatsu, 2023; Kubo, 2024, p. 170). *Ossan's Love* expanded a 2016 60-minute pilot of the same name into a seven-episode series broadcast at 23:15 on Saturdays between April and June 2018. Starting with a 2.9%

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<sup>68</sup> Within this chapter, ABC always refers to the Asahi Broadcasting Corporation and never the American or Australian broadcasters.

<sup>69</sup> Both Wakamatsu (2023) and Kubo (2024) identify six LGBT themed television dramas in 2018 alone, and the former lists there as having been 33 additional shows broadcast by February 2023. This contrasts the the relative paucity of gay romance or LGBT themed shows released prior to 2018.

audience share on its first episode, by the final episode *Ossan's Love* had a 5.7% share, high for its time block, and was the top trending topic on Twitter as it aired (Fujimoto, 2019, p. 136). The show's success helped spark a boom in commissioning of similar shows across Japan's media and provided TV Asahi (and other broadcasters) with a template for how to turn queer representation into *contents*.

Previous scholarship on *Ossan's Love* has focused on the relationship between the series and LGBTQ+ lives and political rights in Japan. Reflecting on the series, Fujimoto (2019, p. 136) suggests that it has the potential to be the “missing link” between the BL genre and the realities of LGBTQ+ life, something that has not existed until now. Highlighting the positive reception from LGBTQ+ communities, she further argues that *Ossan's Love* “dismantles the public's common sense about love one by one, presenting problems that remain even if discrimination [against gay men] was eliminated” (Fujimoto, 2019, pp. 146–147). There was a similarly positive response from Taiwanese queer communities, suggesting the series potential to link sexual and gender minorities and homoerotic fiction even outside of Japan (Chang, 2019). Yet, as Kubo (2024, p. 170) argues, while Fujimoto is correct “to a certain extent,” its potential is betrayed by the series' later failure to further explore issues surrounding LGBTQ+ rights in any meaningful way. Scriptwriter Tokuo noted in a 2018 interview that the “concerns and conflicts” (*nayami ya kattou*) of LGBTQ+ lives were avoided so as to not cause offense due to the series' comedic tone (Tokuo and Okimoto, 2018). Instead, the series is about “pure love” that happens to be queer (Tokuo and Okimoto, 2018). While fans and scholars saw in the work something that could raise and discuss the challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities in Japan, the producers actively denied this in interviews.

Despite Tokuo's claim that he avoided drawing on socio-political issues surrounding LGBTQ+ lives in Japan, *Ossan's Love* itself does refer to them at several points. The show's approach also draws from what Ishida (2015) has described as “representational appropriation” in BL, the usage of the lived experience of real gay men while stripping it of socio-political implications. For example, the first season of *Ossan's Love* contains a coming out scene where one of the main characters introduces the other as his boyfriend to his family. While the rest of his family have no issue, his father completely rejects his son having a boyfriend. He is shown with exaggerated facial expressions, and his over-the-top anger makes him a primarily comedic figure to be

mocked. By contrast, his wife and daughter, who are accepting and knew their son/brother was gay already, simply treat the father like a child having a temper tantrum ('Musuko san o boku ni kudasai!', 2018, 25:00-27:32). Yet the show never explores the father's rejection of his son's sexuality any further. In making the father a purely comedic figure, the show appropriates the imagery of the unaccepting parent but strips it of any potential commentary and does not explore the consequences it may have on the father-son relationship, or to other relationships in the family.

The lack of commentary on socio-political issues in *Ossan's Love* has led to a disconnect with consumers who seek greater engagement with LGBTQ+ issues, however. The LGBT Boom has seen a significant increase in discussion of the social conditions and legal rights of sexual and gender minorities (see Kawasaka, 2024; Taniguchi, 2024), but *Ossan's Love* only lightly touches on such issues. Criticisms of *Ossan's Love's* approach to LGBTQ+ issues were exemplified by discussions on X/Twitter surrounding a March 2024 tweet that criticised TV Asahi's continuations of the show as having "all failed" (*zenbu shippai*). The tweet had over one million views and 12,000 likes. This user argued that the success of season one led executives at TV Asahi to see the series as an "unexpected goldmine" (*omowanu doru bako*) to promote consumption through queer representation, rather than reflect the issues and expectations of audiences for more exploration of the actual issues surrounding LGBTQ+ lives in 2024. In tweets responding to this user, debate turned to whether queer representation needed to be focused on exploring socio-political issues in depth. For some users, the series provided comfort in a fantasy world in which same-sex couples could live mostly without discrimination, an escape from the reality of Japanese society. At the same time, some instead found *Ossan's Love* and similar works to be "too beautified" (*bika shi sugite iru*), presenting an inaccurate depiction of queer lives. While *Ossan's Love* may have been a huge hit in 2018, TV Asahi focusing on how the series could produce *contents* had led to it failing to meet the shifting expectations of audiences. By 2024 the show has become more divisive, increasingly viewed as a cynical cash grab appropriating queer imagery to drive consumption by fans.

The lack of significant exploration of socio-political issues in *Ossan's Love* is likely connected to how TV Asahi conceives of the show - not as representation of sexual and gender minority lives as the viewers on X/Twitter saw it, but rather as a source of

*contents*. Moreover, as a show with queer theming, it also has potential to attract “pink money” from sexual and gender minorities looking for *contents* that ‘represents’ them – which as discussed in chapter one has been a key factor driving the LGBT Boom. In their company history published in 2020, TV Asahi celebrates *Ossan’s Love* as an unplanned success, describing it as a “drama for a new era” (TV Asahi, 2020b, p. 98). This “new era” is not a progressive one pushing LGBTQ+ lives and rights however, but rather a reference to the TV Asahi 360 corporate strategy, which *Ossan’s Love* is described as embodying (*taigen*) (TV Asahi, 2020b, p. 98). This strategy, introduced in 2017, serves as a response to fears of *terebi banare* by offering a 360 degree loop of content that penetrates all aspects of society (TV Asahi Holdings, 2020, p. 2). In its investor-focused presentations on the strategy, *Ossan’s Love* is frequently the example that TV Asahi shows to explain this system (Figure 7.1) (TV Asahi Holdings, 2018, p. 11, 2019, p. 12, 2023b, p. 15). *Ossan’s Love*’s role for TV Asahi is primarily as an innovative marketing and merchandising strategy; that it was a groundbreaking drama that drew appeal for depicting a same-sex relationship is unimportant. Through watching *Ossan’s Love*, people will then return to ‘television’ through consuming TV Asahi *contents* in a wide range of settings, from streaming to merchandising to physical exhibitions.



Figure 7.1: An example of *Ossan’s Love* being presented as a representative of TV Asahi’s *contents* strategy. The five areas represented are: DVD, video streaming, physical exhibition, various official books/manga version and goods. Source: (TV Asahi Holdings, 2018, p. 11).

TV Asahi's focus on how the series drives their marketing and merchandising strategies is evident on the website for the third season of *Ossan's Love*, which is clunkily filled with numerous links to social media accounts, merchandise available both in and out of Japan, streaming services, and a new exhibition for the series (Figure 7.2). Clicking onto the introduction tab, one is greeted with a lengthy explanation of the series almost entirely dedicated to the various ways the show was sold, awards won, its viral success and the cast. Where the page acknowledges the same-sex romance, it is self-congratulatory and describes the first season as helping to transition from an era where same-sex love themed works were seen as "rare" into an "era where they are taken for granted" (*atarimae no jidai*) (TV Asahi, 2024). The success of *Ossan's Love* in TV Asahi's view was in its ability to market queerness in a way that can be seen as both palatable for wider society and as something that they (and other broadcasters) can now make wide-scale media mix projects out of. TV Asahi also sought the production of an association between their brand and pro-LGBTQ+ values through their work popularising the previously "rare" BL drama genre. Yet, as the highlighted discourse on X/Twitter suggests, there remains scepticism towards TV Asahi's approach to queer representation. There is a demand for queer representation that can be marketable *contents* that is also seen as exploring socio-political issues in society. Something akin to this does exist within the TV Asahi universe – in BL dramas the broadcaster imports from Thailand.



Figure 7.2: The top section of the website for the third season of *Ossan's Love* broadcast between January-March 2024. Note the mass of links under the golden navigation bar to goods, social media accounts, exhibitions, and other forms of contents beyond the show itself. Source: (TV Asahi, 2024).

### Thai BL Dramas – New Media Spaces for Queerness

Hung all over the large glass dome fronting the offices of TV Asahi in Tokyo are large, vertical advertisements for various television series and streaming services. In April 2023 when I went, amidst these was a massive banner advertising the “GMMTV Fan Fest” and four Thai series, of which three were BL, fronting an advertisement for TV Asahi’s streaming service Telasa (figure 7.3). Inside the official TV Asahi store was a section set aside for GMMTV, a major production company and talent agency in Thailand, featuring products, manga and magazines relating to Thai stars and BL television series. Thai BL dramas (*lakhon* in Thai) have exploded in number and popularity since the mid-2010s, in many communities decentring or displacing Japanese BL (see Baudinette, 2020, 2023; Prasannam and Chan, 2023; Shimauchi, 2023). In Thai BL, multiple works feature the same pair of actors, who may also do interviews, performances and other media appearances together. The fans are relatively diverse in origin, often not even coming from fandoms where BL or similar forms of same-sex coupling are common (Shimauchi, 2023, pp. 384–385). Amidst this explosion, in 2020 TV Asahi created a link-up with GMMTV, seeking to capitalise on this popularity (TV Asahi, 2020a).



Figure 7.3: The inside of the headquarters of TV Asahi in Roppongi, Tokyo in April 2023 with a large poster on the far left with Telasa and ‘GMMTV Fan Fest’ prominently displayed featuring several Thai dramas, most of which are BL. Picture by author.

Thai BL represents the other side of the BL drama strategy of TV Asahi – the importing of queer narratives, and the stars within them, for an audience that sees these works as more authentic than what is produced in Japan. As an example, parts of the Thai BL industry, including some actors, have explicitly tweeted in support Pride parades and the broader expansion of queer rights in Thailand (Baudinette, 2023, pp. 107–108). Multiple series also have openly queer directors and writers, and Thai BL fans have involved themselves in political action, not just in Thailand but as a part of Asian-wide movements (Schaffar and Praphakorn, 2021; Shimauchi, 2023, p. 389).<sup>70</sup> Thai BL, both in its narratives and industry, are more closely aligned to an explicitly political queerness and thus can make them seem more “authentic” forms of representation (Baudinette, 2023, p. 163). In contrast to *Ossan’s Love*, Thai BL dramas may be seen as going further than simple representational appropriation; the consumption of Thai BL may connect into or even constitute a form of queer activism. TV Asahi, following their corporate aims, seeks to create *contents* from Thai BL by not only streaming subtitled versions of the shows, but by selling merchandise and holding events featuring the actors in Japan.

Exemplifying the approach of TV Asahi is the yearly *GMMTV Fan Fest*, held at the broadcaster’s theatre in Roppongi.<sup>71</sup> These events invite several of the largest Thai BL drama actors to Japan for two shows featuring song performances, brief interviews and a short game featuring pairs of actors. Take for example the segment of the 2022 *GMMTV Fan Fest* focused on two of the most popular actors, Earth and Mix (‘Day 1’, 2022). Their game featured them carrying plastic balls to a basket without using their hands, doing so by getting close to each other in a variety of suggestive poses (e.g., Figure 7.4). Japanese hosts offered commentary on how close they were together and thanked them for the most suggestive poses. The focus of these events is not the original Thai BL text(s), but these orchestrated moments of closeness between actors that encourage strong affective reactions from consumers. The dramas were mostly relegated to highlight reels. TV Asahi takes a media mix approach to Thai BL similar to what we saw in the previous

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example the #milkteaalliance on X/Twitter in 2020, where fans of Thai BL from Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan spread memes discussing a diverse range of taboo political issues from Taiwanese statehood to the Thai monarchy (Thailand has strict *lèse-majesté* laws making mockery of the monarchy illegal) (Schaffar and Praphakorn, 2021, p. 6).

<sup>71</sup> This theatre, alongside several other buildings in the Roppongi area, makes up what TV Asahi calls the ‘Media City.’



chapter. The original text(s) were decentred in favour of events that provide additional moments of queer interactions between the stars of the genre that cannot be seen anywhere else. These moments are a form of *contents* only available through TV Asahi's ecosystem. Events such as the *GMMTV Fan Fest* are held in TV Asahi-owned buildings and streamed on platforms TV Asahi holds a significant stake in. Thus, fans in Japan must interact with TV Asahi's ecosystem to access the *contents* for Thai BL and its stars created by the company. Far from providing an 'authentic' queer experience, the *GMMTV Fan Fest* highlights TV Asahi's approach to Thai BL – the genre and its actors are vectors for the creation of *contents* from queerness.



Figure 7.4: An example of Thai drama stars Earth and Mix carrying a plastic ball for a game at the GMMTV Fan Fest. This is one of several poses they take over the course of the challenge. Source: ('Day 1', 2022).

However, fans of Thai BL are not all passive accepters of TV Asahi and its reframing of the stars of the dramas. As Baudinette's (2023) interviews with Japanese Thai BL fans reveals, those who knew of the TV Asahi tie-up were sceptical of the broadcaster and seemed hopeful that they would largely leave creation to their Thai partner, GMMTV. However, while they may be sceptical, TV Asahi provides official ways to view Thai BL, and their events provide a way to see their favourite stars at events in person. Moreover, over the last four years, frequent remakes of Japanese BL dramas in Thai brokered by TV Asahi have begun to spring up, with the latest example being *Ossan's Love* in 2024. The two Thai stars heading the remake, Earth and Mix, were even invited to appear in an episode of the third season of *Ossan's Love* ('Oshiri o fuku made kaerema 10', 2024). While scholars have argued that Thai BL reflects a radical reframing



of cultural flows that decentres Japan (Baudinette, 2020), far from being a passive partner, TV Asahi are actively seeking to shape Thai BL and recentre it on Japan. While it was not yet released at the time of writing, *Ossan's Love Thailand* will, through it adapts the moments that touch on sexual and gender minority rights, highlight to what extent TV Asahi's approach to representation gets further exported to Thailand. The approach taken to the production of queer representation in Japan, and in TV Asahi shows, is not only relevant within the country, but also can and does influence other countries and their approaches to queer depictions.

### **TV Asahi and Queer Anime**

Alongside TV Asahi's live action output, the broadcaster has also produced successful anime with significant queer theming – most notably the highly successful anime, *Yuri!!! On Ice* in 2016 which does feature a male same-sex romance. The series, focusing on male figure skating, depicts main character Yūri Katsuki, his coach Victor, their aim to win the world tournament and their developing relationship. While not the first series to depict a male-male kiss, and its depiction (as discussed in chapter three) obfuscates the lips, the series drew massive attention both in and out of Japan (Morimoto, 2019).<sup>72</sup> This success was made more remarkable by its reliance on on-demand streaming sites; it was only broadcast on four television stations domestically.<sup>73</sup> Despite corporate statements proclaiming it a model for future original anime (TV Asahi, 2020; TV Asahi Holdings, 2023a, p. 16), the company has rarely attempted to mimic the approach of the show to same-sex romance. Instead, where queer theming is present, the approach of anime broadcast on the station is broadly similar to approach seen in Kyoto Animation's works – stories that can be understood as both completely queer and homosocial simultaneously.

The closest direct attempt to follow the success of *Yuri!!! On Ice* was the 2021 anime *Sk8 the Infinity* (hereafter *Sk8*), broadcast by Osakan ANN affiliate ABC. Directed by Utsumi Hiroko, the work falls somewhere between *Yuri!!! On Ice* and Utsumi's previous directorial work on *Free!* discussed in chapter four. There are no scenes of the two main characters directly professing their love or acting intimately, but there are

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<sup>72</sup> The anime adaptation of the Sci-Fi series *No. 6* features a male same-sex kiss without any obfuscation and aired five years beforehand in 2011, as an example.

<sup>73</sup> These were TV Asahi, Sun Television (Hyōgo), Saga TV, and, starting a month later, Nagasaki Culture TV.

instead multiple scenes that indicate at least one of the main characters has romantic feelings for the other. For example, when one character is asked if there is a person he “likes” (*suki*) romantically by his mother, she gets a seemingly affirmative response (‘Shukumei no tōnamento!’, 2021, 16:12). Another scene is almost a direct recreation of the kiss from *Yuri!!! On Ice*, with this character leaping out at the end of a skateboarding race onto the other lead (Figure 7.5). The anime, with its intertextual connections to *Yuri!!! On Ice* and shared director with *Free!*’s first two seasons aims to appeal to fans looking of queer relationships.



Figure 7.5: An example of *Sk8* (on the right) seeming to reference the imagery of the kiss scene of *Yuri!!! On Ice* (on the left). Source: (‘Guranpurishirīzu kaimaku! Yacchaina Chūgoku taikai! Furī puroguramu’, 2016, 20:53; ‘Oretachi no mugendai!’, 2021, 18:34).

Yet, much like *Free!*, *Sk8* never commits to the queer reading as the only one; the other character’s feelings are never made clear. It is completely possible to read the narrative as depicting a one-sided crush, especially as the other lead does attempt at one point to flirt with a girl (‘Yukemuri misuterī sukēto?!’, 2021). The merchandising of the series also reflects this, much of it providing a structure like that of *Yowamushi Pedal* with art that is sold with the characters both as a pair and on their own. For example, in the merchandise stand in figure 7.6, merchandise with single characters is prominently visible, with paired items using the same art also available. No single reading of the relationship is privileged. Ambiguity is built into the series as if to ensure that it appeals not only to audiences seeking queer romances between the characters but also ones between themselves and the character or homosocial ones. *Sk8* does not commit to a clear queer narrative, instead leaving it to the viewer to interpret what they identify in the relationship between the leads.



Figure 7.6: A Sk8 the Infinity merchandise section at the Akihabara Animate store in September 2021. Photo by author.

Despite the success of *Yuri!!! On Ice* and *Sk8*, the development of anime featuring queer themes has been slow at TV Asahi when compared to its competitors. Other anime exploring themes beyond male same-sex relationships – for example *Yuri is My Job!* (2023) on Tokyo MX - can be found on other networks with reasonable frequency since the mid-2010s, yet TV Asahi's output is limited in volume.<sup>74</sup> TV Asahi's limited number of queer anime is likely a function of the medium, one that frustrates attempts to rapidly put out new seasons, movies and televisual contents. Even *Sk8*, with its merchandise being ubiquitous in anime/manga stores in Japan during my fieldwork, had only got an announced second season with no release window. Anime is not cheap to make, costing a minimum of 15,000,000 yen (£81,000) per episode for an anime aired in the midnight time slot – when both *Yuri!!! On Ice* and *Sk8* were aired (Hasegawa, 2023, p. 42).<sup>75</sup> The high costs associated with anime production encourages the spreading of costs between

<sup>74</sup> *Whisper Me a Love Song* (2024, *Sasayaku yō ni koi o utau*), which aired April-June 2024 before entering indefinite hiatus is the only recent Yuri anime to air on TV Asahi.

<sup>75</sup> A drama aired at prime viewing times (7pm-11pm) costs a minimum of 30,000,000 yen (£162,000) per episode (Takahori, 2024).

companies, with the most common method being the production committee system (*seisaku iinkai*) (Hasegawa, 2023, p. 41; Mori, 2023, pp. 9–10). In a production committee, several funders will join to form a single entity to control the production of a series with each getting a cut of the profit from the licensing and broadcasting of the series (Hasegawa, 2023, p. 41). While production committees are used in the creation of some live-action television, production is primarily handled by the broadcaster with the backing of advertisers who pay for product placement and commercial slots (Nitori, 2017, p. 16). For an anime to be produced, the cooperation of several large corporations is needed – accelerating a show through production needs to be financially justifiable for all involved parties.

As significant capital is needed to join in on the funding of an anime, oftentimes the animation studios themselves are not directly represented on these committees (Morikawa, Mizoguchi and Moriya, 2023, p. 88). Even when they are they may not receive a particularly high cut of the profits. The animation studio behind *Yuri!!! On Ice* has publicly stated this to be the case for them when they have been asked about the series (Eisenbeis, 2023). If there is little incentive for the anime studio, then production will slow regardless of consumer demand. While *Yuri!!! On Ice* and *Sk8* have been successful, they did not provide the explosive mainstream success that would lead to the rapid production of new series, movies and other animated media. By contrast, a massively popular series like football manga *Blue Lock* – whose anime adaptation aired on TV Asahi in 2022 – has received both an anime movie and a second season within two years. Anime provides an example where the medium places a bottleneck on production; the format does not incentivise the creation of myriad queer works that may not prove as profitable to make *contents* from.

### **Hiroshima Home Television: Reporting on Queer Lives**

Alongside dramas and anime, non-fiction offerings are also a feature of ANN, the network that TV Asahi is the central node in. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, while the primary driver of content made for the ANN network is TV Asahi, each local station not only has output created for a local audience, but also provides some of that to be aired outside of its area. This section will focus one example of this, Hiroshima affiliate Hiroshima Home Television's (HOME) series of documentaries about sexual and gender minorities produced between 2021 and 2023 under the title *LGBTQ and I* (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu,

2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b). These documentaries, ranging in length from twenty to fifty minutes, focused on three individuals and one couple, interspersed with scenes taken at two LGBTQ+ gathering spaces. The focus of these documentaries is much more diverse than the heavy focus on gay men in other works discussed thus far: the three main individuals followed are all trans or non-binary and the couple are lesbian. The series differs from many of the common elements that have featured in queer representation discussed so far in this thesis and the documentaries seek to build a connection between the LGBTQ+ individuals shown and the viewer.

The approach of these documentaries is typified in the example of a trans boy attending middle-school in Hiroshima. The two documentaries about this boy intersperses moments of his daily life at school, interaction with other parts of the LGBTQ community and some scenes taken at a hospital in Okayama where he attends a gender clinic (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu, 2021a, 2022a, 2023b).<sup>76</sup> The documentary primarily aims to frame him as normal and living his daily life just like the rest of the viewers, only differing in that his gender differs from the one assigned to him at birth. His school lets him use male facilities, stay in the same dormitories on trips, join the boys' sports clubs and it is repeatedly stressed how well-supported he is by those around him. The struggles he has faced being trans are only alluded to. For example, one scene features the boy's grandmother tearfully discussing him expressing suicidal thoughts to the family (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu, 2023, 14:30). Viewers are never provided any additional context for this, the framing in the documentary itself seems mostly meant to elicit sympathy for the family. The struggles surrounding being trans are suggested, but never built upon and left to the audience's imaginations.

Yet, when turning to the coverage of the lesbian couple, the challenges facing LGBTQ+ people and communities are made more explicit. Through scenes of the couple living a "normal" lifestyle, eating together, going to the beach, and living together, the documentary uses this to make an overarching argument for the legalisation of same-sex marriage (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu, 2021b). During the documentary, one half of the couple calls for its legalisation as a "right" (*kenri*) and features the other talking about

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<sup>76</sup> All the videos that featured this individual were made private on YouTube in June 2024; this describes the videos as they existed at the time this section was originally written in March 2024.

how she wants a “family.” This is superimposed against the couple walking down an overcast beach as large grey text displays both places and life events in which they face difficulties, followed with the explanation that “they cannot be legally recognised as spouses” (Figure 7.7). The framing of the scene visually illustrates their struggle; they may live together but there is always a dark cloud hanging over them of all the constraints they face as a same-sex couple. This more explicit political stance stands in stark contrast to the more apolitical approach taken in the documentary about the trans teen.



Figure 7.7: A shot from the HOME documentary on the same-sex couple in Hiroshima showing them walking down an overcast beach together. The grey text reads: “They cannot be recognised as lawful spouses.” Source: (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu, 2021b, 03:36).

A 50-minute-long mash-up of all of the *LGBTQ and I* documentaries was released in March 2023 with an additional section on the creation of a partnership system in the city of Mihara in Hiroshima (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu, 2023b). During the section of the mash-up documentary on Mihara there is a segment that shows us with two pages of statements in opposition to the proposed partnership system, set against a dark background and lit by a single light. Mirroring some of the comments seen in the survey discussed in chapter three, we are read claims from one person that “there are no LGBT people around me. This is about a limited number of mentally ill people” and another who questioned how the system will “increase the number of children.” These “words filled with prejudice,” as director Hanafusa Asako describes them in the narration, are read to draw attention to the inflammatory nature of the opponents, who are represented through

faceless characters on a dimly lit page. To the director, this is a darker side of Japanese society, a regressive force to be contrasted to the mayor who understands diversity

By contrast, in the documentary about 62-year-old trans woman Okuda Kei, brief mention is made of discriminatory comments online, but no examples are provided (HOME Hiroshima nyūsu, 2023a). Same-sex marriage is given significant support throughout the series, while measures like proposed changes to allow greater self-identification of trans people, violations of human rights in the current transgender law which were successfully challenged in court in 2023, or other issues affecting trans people in Japan are either left unmentioned or only lightly alluded to. As was seen in chapters one and three, while same-sex marriage and the politics surrounding it draw significant focus, the same attention is not given to the socio-political struggles of trans people. This suggests a divide – one in which it is appropriate to display overt support for same-sex marriage, but trans rights are seen as less easy to explicitly discuss.

A divide in the coverage of same-sex marriage and trans issues is readily apparent in a trimmed-down version released in July 2023 across all parts of the ANN network under the *Telementary* series label (ANNnewsCH, 2023).<sup>77</sup> This version, edited further down to 25 minutes, cuts the non-binary student entirely, almost entirely removes Okuda's story, and focused mostly on the young trans boy and the lesbian couple. In addition to this, Director Hanafusa Asako is more prominent, with her experiences now at the centre of the documentary – the reporting acted as a form of queer self-discovery for Hanafusa, and she has taken on a greater role at the Osaka-based *Asahi Shinbun* where she is normally stationed, such as giving diversity seminars. The result shifts the focus from the subjects themselves and Hiroshima prefecture to the groups involved in the production of the documentaries - the reporter and the Osakan newspaper supporting her. Once the work leaves its original, local, context, it is repackaged into a form that benefits the program's backers rather than the people that it is meant to be representing. These documentaries function both as a representation of queer lives and reflect how TV Asahi and its affiliates position themselves in discussions about LGBTQ+ issues from the perspective of production.

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<sup>77</sup> This is a series of short documentaries taken from reporting by the various ANN partner stations.

### ***Abema Prime: Streaming a Trans Panic***

The above sections suggest that TV Asahi and its ANN affiliates are broadly supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, even if that support is driven by corporate interests. However, in another part of the broader TV Asahi ecosphere, Abema, we see a different story. Abema, launched in 2016, has over 20,000,000 weekly active users as of June 2023 and offers both on-demand streaming and free to watch, television-like channels (Abema, 2023; Tse, 2024, p. 111). Within my survey, 18.3% of respondents indicated that they used the service – 8% more than used major international streaming platform Netflix. In this section, I will focus specifically on the representation of trans issues on Abema by looking at their flagship wide show *Abema Prime*.

This show brings together celebrities, many affiliated to TV Asahi, ‘experts’ and average citizens to debate various social and political topics and is broadcast live between 21:00 and 23:00 every weekday. Many of the topics it covers heavily feature X/Twitter, and the show seems to strongly court heavy social media users. A selection of segments is also uploaded to YouTube. Starting in 2023, coverage of trans issues has grown significantly, frequently posing women’s rights and trans rights against each other and pull large viewing figures. As a result, Abema is a key vector for the importation and spread of trans-exclusionary rhetoric that was discussed in chapter three that merges both Euro-American discourses and local Japanese ones (see Shimizu, 2020; Thurlow, 2024; Würrer, 2024). One segment originally broadcast in October 2023, featuring the leaders of the Conservative Party of Japan and their views on LGBTQ+ (and especially trans) people over 2 million views on YouTube (Abema Prime, 2023b) – having gained over 400,000 views between when I first began tracking these numbers in March 2024 and the time of this thesis being completed in August 2024. This is over one million more views than parts one and two of the same episode where they discussed other issues. Episodes critical of queer, especially trans, lives provide clicks and potential virality across Japanese language social media, thus encouraging Abema to make more.

To illustrate this, I focus here on one representative segment on trans issues that originally aired in November 2023 and had 991,000 views on YouTube in August 2024, an increase of at least 200,000 views from the 731,000 views it had in March (Abema Prime, 2023c). The segment features six guests, three of whom are representatives of two



anti-trans groups.<sup>78</sup> These two groups take the extreme position that the Special Measures Act that allows for legal changes of gender in Japan (passed in 2003) must be completely repealed, and a “biological” definition of women be enshrined in the law. They argue not only that trans women are a threat to women and should not exist, but that women who do not fit exact biological standards should also be excised. The remaining guests are all male, two of them providing the pro-trans views in the episode. The setting of the studio (Figure 7.8) poses the two sides against each other, with the male pro-trans side opposite the female, anti-trans, guests. In doing so, the set adds to the impression that the segment provides throughout: that the pro-trans men are speaking over the marginalised concerned women.



Figure 7.8: A shot from the *Abema Prime* segment with the pro-trans side represented by the two men on the right and the anti-trans side represented by two women (one obscured) on the left. The bottom caption reads: “Gender Diversity and Women’s Spaces - How do we relieve concerns?” Source: (Abema Prime, 2023c, 10:02).

The structuring of the debate as pro-trans men versus “concerned” women was visible in a blog reflecting on the experience by one of the anti-trans activists who appeared. In a blog, she claimed that the program reminded women who watched it of “the innumerable times they have been spoken over in a pressuring and coercive way and lectured by men” (Ke, 2024). Similar sentiments were seen in the YouTube comments,

<sup>78</sup> These groups are not particularly big, with around 1,500 followers on X/Twitter each, and cannot reasonably be called representative of women in Japan despite the claims of the hosts.

which then framed this as a wider problem within discussions of LGBTQ+ rights. One representative example divided the opinions into a “female side” and a “male side” with the former simply expressing that “there is an issue so we want you to do something about it” against the latter’s mantra of making a society where we must “make a society that accepts LGBTQ people.” Another claims that it is often not realised that “it is men that are pushing LGBT [issues].” The episode plays to a simplistic binary understanding of gender relations through its staging, supporting the view of these anti-trans activists and their supporters that the people who oppose them are all “men” who want to lecture and belittle women. Such a framing then connect into broader anti-LGBTQ+ political talking points, reflecting what was visible in chapter three. Through this segment, *Abema Prime* further fuels queer- and transphobia, seemingly in pursuit of the heavy engagement from anti-trans audiences that this, and other segments like it, engenders.

Support for anti-trans positions is not just expressed through the physical staging of the show and the gender dynamics of the panellists. The framing of the show, how it is structured, and the captions displayed on-screen give generous depictions of the anti-trans activists and their views throughout. The episode itself starts with a sensationalist story of a “man” being discovered in a female public bath, followed by the news of the striking down of sections of the gender identity act as human rights violations a few weeks before.<sup>79</sup> We are then shown an anti-trans protest that the female guests were involved in. This protest is described as wanting to divide toilets by gender and to define women biologically to ensure “safety and respect for women [in society].” A critical voice caught in the video is described as a “jeer”, and the heavy blurring obscures the fact that the anti-trans activists were participating in a counter protest to a pro-LGBTQ+ rights event. The framing here implies the existence of a clear connection between these events: the focus on diversity is letting “men” into women’s spaces, the law is being loosened to make it easy and the protests of women are being ignored. This introduction primes the viewer to believe that the anti-trans guests are reasonable and the “jeer” they received to have been unfair as they simply care about “respect” and “safety” for women. For Abema, trans rights are not only up for debate, but it is appropriate to platform those who question the

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<sup>79</sup> The explanation of the incident at the public bath, carried by both major newspapers and TV stations (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2023c; *Tōkai terebi News*, 2024) in November 2023, never actually makes it clear why they believe this individual to be lying when they identify themselves as a (presumably trans) woman.

very existence of trans people so long as they can generate further engagement with *Abema Prime*.

Throughout the episode, the guests struggle to defend their positions. The apparent leader of the anti-trans trio stumbles on her words and is unable to explain why she believes that trans people do not exist, describing it as a difference of opinion. One of the other guests then repeatedly starts referring to trans women as “dainty men” (*kyasha na otoko*) who wear women’s clothing (*josō danshi*). While host interrupts to point out that she is making too much of a “leap,” the subtitle at the bottom of the screen immediately changes to reference “malicious ‘men in women’s clothing’” (*akushitsu josō otoko*) as if in support. Her only way of understanding the existence of trans women is to believe they are “dainty,” suggesting that their transness comes from their failure to be real men. She echoes trans-exclusionary feminist rhetoric, creating essentialising explanations for male and female behaviour that reify traditional gender norms to rationalise anti-trans viewpoints (Thurlow, 2024).

However, it is arguably in the offensiveness of their remarks that the guests find their appeal; they come off as ‘authentic.’ For some commenters on the video, the mild pushback the guests received in the broadcast was not criticism, it was symbolic of society not listening to “women.” That these guests were diminishing the experiences of trans women and pushing for policies that amount to the complete erasure of trans people in society is irrelevant to these viewers or producers. They can be seen as ‘sympathetic’ victims of the male guests, ‘diversity’ and wider LGBTQ+ community. Going onto nearly any other video on trans or gender issues by *Abema Prime* reveals similar trends – high view counts and numerous comments expressing anti-trans views. In chapter three I discussed the troubling transphobic sentiments that pervaded many of the comments in my survey, and here we see how groups involved in production are mobilising those with anti-trans sentiments as consumers. *Abema Prime* turns trans people into a vector for more debates, more discussion, more *contents* to consume without caring for those affected by it. Unlike same-sex marriage, trans issues are acceptable in the eyes of Abema to question for the purpose of creating *contents* and drawing people back to television.

### **Conclusions: TV Asahi in the Boom**

While television may no longer be the family event it once was, nor as crucial to structuring the daily lives of people in Japan, its influence remains salient in society.

Conglomerates like TV Asahi and ANN may continue to maintain their relevance through YouTube, streaming sites such as Abema or Telasa and media mixes. As a part of this, queerness, and the ability to create *contents* out of it, has been crucial to the strategy of TV Asahi.

This chapter has looked at TV Asahi's approach to queerness from the lens of production and how the strategies employed by the company draws broadly on trends and representations of queerness that were discussed throughout the previous chapters. The responses to the survey showed tepid support for same-sex marriage, but an underlying anti-trans current that is evident in the divided approach of HOME and Abema. With Kyoto Animation, we saw how the works of the studio depicted queerness, providing both a homosocial and homoerotic reading of character interactions within its works, supporting both readings as valid. In TV Asahi and its affiliates' anime we can see this reflected through works such as *Sk8*, marketing them as works that are both queer and heteronormative depending on the consumer. Supporting these readings are massive media mixes akin to what was seen with *Yowamushi Pedal*, monetising and exploiting consumer desires for queer connections. When we turn to the most explicitly queer part of TV Asahi's output, its BL dramas, we can see both a massive focus on monetisation and the media mixing of queerness. Queerness acts as a form of *contents*, one that is of key importance to the strategy of TV Asahi and ANN.

The importance of queerness to the *contents* strategy of TV Asahi is connected to how they seek to produce a connection between themselves as certain narratives surrounding sexual and gender minorities depending on the format and platform. By connecting themselves to representations of queerness TV Asahi seeks to drive engagement, and by extension people back to television through the creation of an all-encompassing *contents* loop. The approach of TV Asahi embodies the production process of the Circuit of Culture – the broadcaster is seeking to influence the values associated with it through the “cultural meanings” attached to their outputs (du Gay, 1997, p. 5). By focusing on queer works such as *Ossan's Love*, this allows them to specifically target audiences who are either seeking some form of representation or (presumed female) fans of male same-sex romances. From TV Asahi's perspective, this helps to draw people into the wider ANN ecosphere, whether by drawing them to watch live television, use their news sites and YouTube channels, or encourage engagement with their brands.

At the same time, through shows such as *Abema Prime*, which while filmed at TV Asahi's studios are one step removed from the company, they instead strike a markedly different tone. The LGBT Boom is presented as bringing about serious societal questions that need to be answered. Voice is given to fringe groups in aid of appealing to the vast number of reactionary anti-LGBTQ+, and especially anti-trans, groups on platforms such as X/Twitter. These videos draw large engagement and through social media algorithms draw these viewers to other related output, and ultimately to Abema itself and its ecosystem. Outside of the view of the more liberal TV Asahi audience, the same resources, presenters and studios are used to broadcast shows that deviate from the editorial line of the parent company in the name of increasing viewership. The usage of queerness as a corporate strategy to reverse *terebi banare* means that queer representation can never follow a single consistent line and must be appealing to both pro- and anti-LGBTQ+ groups.

TV Asahi is ultimately a symbol of the wider issues surrounding queer representation in Japan's media sphere amidst the LGBT boom. Queerness is primarily treated as a source of *contents* for further driving engagement with television, and the media more broadly. The importance of queerness is not limited to a specific genre, medium or targeted to only one subcultural group, but rather visible across TV Asahi's outputs. The LGBT Boom is simply the latest frame through which this queerness is packaged and presented in the outputs of the broadcaster and in wider societal discourse.

## 8. Conclusion

Between October 2022 and July 2023, the fifteenth instalment of the long-running mecha robot series *Gundam* was broadcast: *Mobile Suit Gundam: The Witch from Mercury* (2022–2023), often shortened to *G-Witch*. Woven into the plot of *G-Witch* is a romance between the two lead characters: Suletta Mercury and Miorine Rembrane, the first same-sex romance to be depicted in *Gundam*. The series finale ends with the pair having seemingly married off-screen, as the characters wear matching rings in the final scenes (Figure 8.1) (‘Me ippai no shukufuku o kimi ni’, 2023). Though this plot point is never made explicit, the imagery of the final scenes, when paired with the development of Suletta and Miorine’s relationship throughout the series, made it apparent.



Figure 8.1: Suletta (left) and Miorine (right) wearing matching rings in the finale of *G-Witch*. Source: (‘Me ippai no shukufuku o kimi ni’, 2023, 21:12)

The lack of explicit confirmation provided some room for doubt, which culminated in a controversy surrounding an interview that was later edited on the request of *Gundam* rights holders Bandai-Namco. In an interview with the official magazine for the series released in late July 2023, the voice actor for Suletta referred to the pair as being a “married couple” (*kekkon shita futari*) (Ichinose, Lynn and Noto, 2023). However, just days later, the digital version of this issue would be updated to delete this reference to the pair being married. Bandai-Namco would later explain that this was because they wanted “to leave interpretation of the work up to each person’s perspective” (*hitori hitori no toraekata, kaishaku ni makase*) (Bandai-Namco Filmworks, 2023). The actress explicitly stating the pair were married in an official magazine did not allow for this “interpretation” and removed any ambiguity that may have existed in their relationship. Like the texts of Kyoto Animation or the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*, Bandai-Namco attempted to maintain ambiguity, treating the original text as a floating signifier that did not support a

singular interpretation of Suletta and Miorine’s relationship. However, unlike those cases, Bandai-Namco saw intense backlash to their decision from consumers who instead saw it as attempting to regulate and erase the queerness of *G-Witch*.

Over late July and early August 2023, the global *Gundam* fandom took several measures to express their extreme displeasure with the decision. This ranged from sharing memes mocking Bandai-Namco as “conservative” using dialogue from the series (Figure 8.2) to attempting to organise a mass email campaign to Bandai-Namco demanding they revert the edit (Figure 8.3). As the example tweet in figure 8.4 shows, for some consumers it was unclear how one could read the relationship between Suletta and Miorine as anything other than romantic. These examples highlight how Bandai-Namco’s actions were seen as the reaction of a “conservative” company stuck in the past. Attempting to suggest it was up to fans to decide what the pair’s relationship meant only added to the impression they had that Bandai Namco instead appeared to be scared to stand behind the queer themes of *G-Witch*. Fans thus felt only way to convince Bandai-Namco to change this stance was thus a mass pressure campaign organised online that drew on the global fandom of the show. In an era in which LGBTQ+-themed works are booming in Japan and online fandoms create the potential for a global reaction, Bandai-Namco’s edit of the magazine seemed out of touch and regressive to consumers. A disconnect existed between consumption and production over how queerness should be depicted and understood within *G-Witch*.



Figure 8.2: Example of a meme being shared in the English-language fandom. Source: (asdfmovienerd39, 2023).



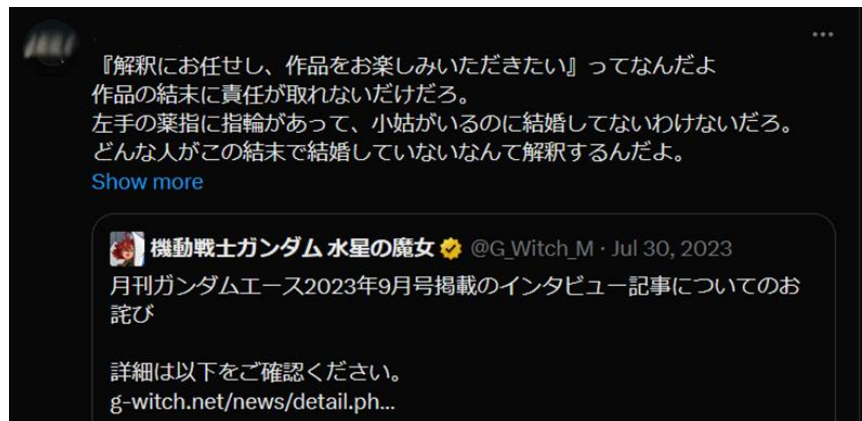


Figure 8.3: Example of a quote retweet of the explanation of the edit. The tweet is expressing confusion at the statement they want to leave the interpretation to fans as the author feels that there is no other way to interpret the pair's relationship.

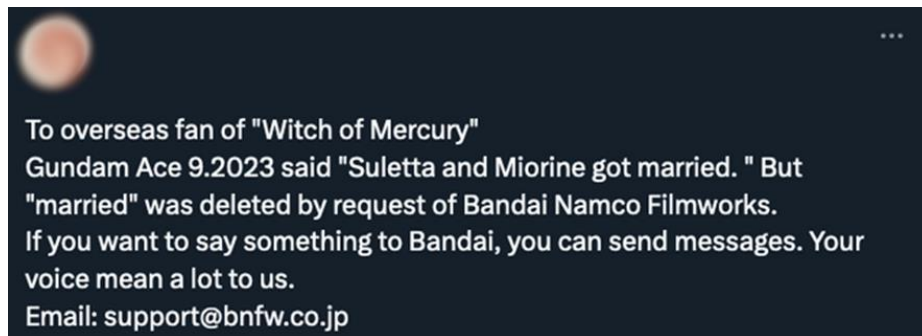


Figure 8.4: Japanese fan on X/Twitter requesting fans globally to send emails to Bandai-Namco's support line to express displeasure.

While the edit to the digital version of the magazine was never reverted, later interviews with creatives would confirm the pair were married (takkun, 2023), indicating Bandai-Namco was no longer seeking to leave their relationship up to “interpretation.” While this incident encapsulates the ambiguity that surrounds queerness highlighted throughout this thesis, this example also shows the continuing shifts in what defines queer representation. Fans of *G-Witch* were seeking explicit queer representation, rather than the more ambiguous ones that we have seen throughout this thesis in series like *Free!*, *Sound! Euphonium* or *Yowamushi Pedal*. They were also willing to directly push back on and interact with production to do so, a contrast to *Hypnosis Mic* fandom's attempts to isolate their queer fantasies from the rights holders. What *G-Witch* highlights is how queer representation is constantly shifting and being reshaped, and the elements that define it will continue to change into the future. Underlying all of this is the cultural processes that



have defined queer representation over the fourteen years covered in this period, set against the background of an ongoing LGBT Boom.

Central to the role of queerness in the media has been the thirty years of queer booms since the 1990s. As was outlined in the introduction to this thesis, these booms can be traced back to the gay boom of the 1990s, a period in which sexual and gender minority lifeworlds were published in large numbers, the Boys Love (BL) media industry began to flourish and queer theory was introduced into Japan. This was followed in the 2000s by the boom in *onē-kyara*, crossdressing gay men, and the contemporary backlash from conservative forces to gender equality measures, encapsulated by the opposition to the term “gender free” (Yamaguchi, 2014; Maree, 2020). This boom eventually would be superseded by the one that serves as the background for this thesis, the LGBT Boom of the 2010s and 2020s. However, none of these booms have been followed by a ‘bust,’ and a subsequent disappearance of queerness from the media circuit. Instead, what has shifted is the lexicons used to speak of queerness, from gay to various terms surrounding gender to LGBT. What began in previous booms, from BL to *onē-kyara* continue to persist to this day but adapted to a different media context. These booms reveal that queerness is not just confined to specific subcultures or genres but is endemic to the very nature of the Japanese media circuit and how sexuality and gender exists within it.

Underpinning the way these booms shift is the processes that define the depiction of queerness in society through the Circuit of Culture: signification, association, production, consumption and regulation. While each chapter focused on one of these processes, they all interact equally, no matter where you start on the circuit you must go through every process (du Gay *et al.*, 1997, p. 4). By focusing on these different processes, I have highlighted the multitude of ways we can approach the definition of queerness in the Japanese media sphere. As Hall (1982, p. 65) argues, the generation of meaning in society is “part of what has to be struggled over.” Representation is a process through which various groups struggle over how meaning is formed and in what way it is; is a negotiation between the interests of many different groups in society. The forms of queerness we see in the media are the result of the way these groups interact and construct meaning and how this defines what queerness means to the Japanese media and wider society.

To interrogate the relationship between queer representation, the processes that underpin it and the cultural booms occurring in the background, I have applied in this thesis a mixed methods approach. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used to highlight what each approach can reveal about the media. In chapters three and six, I made use of quantitative approaches to survey analysis and social media data, seeking to understand the ways that queerness was constructed and interacted with on a wider scale. In chapters four and seven, I focused primarily on qualitative discourse analysis to discuss the texts of Kyoto Animation and TV Asahi. Chapters five and six featured in-person fieldwork from observations taken over the course of September 2022 to September 2023. Each of these methods provided a different way to approach and understand how queerness is represented in the Japanese media and understand its role in the wider media circuit. To understand the different elements of the Circuit of Culture requires the use of diverse methodologies.

Drawing on this mixed methods approach, the background of the LGBT Boom and the Circuit of Culture, each chapter of this thesis looked at a different aspect of the Japanese media. In chapter three, my focus was on association, providing a background for how queerness is seen in Japan, what meanings it is connected to and the effect it can have on audiences who see it. Through analysis of my survey, I highlighted how audience understandings of queerness are shaped by its realness, whether it was 2D or live-action, and ambiguity. Audiences seemed to respond more positively to queerness that could be ignored or was open to alternative readings and interpretations. I extended this line of argumentation in chapter four, which looked at signification through the language of Kyoto Animation's anime adaptations of *Sound! Euphonium* and *Free!*. In both texts, there was a balance between the balanced between two possible readings - a queer one and a homosocial one - signified by the language of the text with both supported and recognised by the producers and audiences. The works of the studio appealed to both audiences seeking a cisheteronormative sports anime and a queer coming-of-age narrative due to the availability of multiple readings.

Chapter five turned to a variety of different spaces, online and offline, to highlight the way that queerness is regulated, not necessarily by legal forces, but by producers and the consumers themselves. Queerness, and the shape it takes, is defined not only by its relationship to cisheteronormativity, but also by the norms created between consumers,

based on their understandings of legal and corporate regulations, and community standards. This was especially evident in online spaces, where an account that failed to fully follow *Hypnosis Mic* BL fandom norms triggered a moral panic surrounding minors. In Ikebukuro, we saw a different approach to regulation – with the local municipality enabling the queer activities of the female fans that congregate in the region as a part of their local redevelopment plans. However, while the activities of fans are not heavily regulated, they increasingly occur in spaces controlled by production such as Hareza. Yet, unlike online space, these physical spaces are limited by the need to be located in a convenient place to access them.

Underpinning the governance and role of space in the media is the role of queer representation in the production of *contents*, discussed in chapter six through looking at the media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal*. The media mix of *Yowamushi Pedal* draws heavily on the queer fantasies of fans to drive consumption, with the texts and paratexts that surround the series facilitating several potential readings of character relationships. Greater access to queerness is thus locked behind consumption of these media mixes and the financial, location and knowledge-based barriers to participation in them. Finally, in chapter seven I looked at production through a study of TV Asahi and how it places queerness within its *contents* strategy in an era of *terebi banare*. Queerness is important to driving engagement with the range of TV Asahi's outputs and thereby counteracting the drift away from historically dominant modes of television watching. TV Asahi reflects not only the central connection between queerness and *contents*, but also the central role of queerness to the wider media circuit. Queerness is not located in one specific genre or represented in the aim of targeting specific groups but plays a central role to the way that the media is organised in Japan.

The examples above are however only a snapshot of queer representation over the last fourteen years against the LGBT Boom. Queer representation is constantly in transition and the shape of the next developments are also beginning to emerge. In chapter four, *Liz and the Blue Bird* seemed to privilege a queer reading for the relationship between the main characters of the film being over any homosocial explanations. The more explicit queerness of *Liz and the Blue* may be indicative of a wider shift in the texts of Kyoto Animation away from ambiguity. When looking at the media mix, *Blue Lock* suggested a shift towards more explicit queerness in marketing strategies. With *G-Witch*,

I demonstrated how consumers are pushing back against attempts to make queer representation ambiguous, as was more common in early periods. In a more concerning trend, anti-trans narratives seem to be emerging within the media sphere, visible in online-streaming sites such as Abema. Queer representation is constantly in transition; this thesis is only a snapshot of the cultural moment against which it is set. However, by focusing in on this period of cultural awareness around LGBT issues, I have illustrated the centrality of queerness to all aspects of the Circuit of Culture. Queerness may be in transition, but its embeddedness in the cultural flows of the Japanese media sphere suggests that it will continue to be central through those processes of change.

The constant state of transition that queerness is in also highlights another important point: that there has been no ‘bust’ that follows the various queer booms of the past thirty years. The examples raised in the previous paragraph do not suggest a fall-off in representation followed by the creation of a “new difference” to be commodified and exploited, as a cyclical model of booms may suggest (Yoshimoto, 1989; Maree, 2020). Instead, there is continuity and evolution - as the lexicons and cultural resonances of queerness shift, so do the media representations of sexuality and gender. This thesis is set against the LGBT Boom, but that itself has vague boundaries, it is possible that in a decade part of this thesis will have been reinscribed as occurring during a different boom yet to be canonised in public discourse. What we see in the media at this moment is simply the contemporary configuration of queerness that emerges from the interactions between the processes that create culture through the Japanese media. By considering these processes in the round, this thesis has worked towards a more holistic understanding of queer representation in the Japanese media that is not tied to the boom and ‘bust’ models of previous analyses. Instead, this thesis has argued that queerness is one lens through which we can understand the broader operations of the Japanese media.

Through this study, I have looked at the Japanese media sphere, and the cultural flows that underpin it, as a whole rather than focusing only on one aspect of it. Previous studies of queer representation in Japan have tended to focus on specific sections of the media, or genres and their relationship with queerness. One of the largest fields for the study of queerness in Japan in recent years has been Boys Love (BL) media, the subject of numerous articles, books and edited volumes about the topic (e.g., Mizoguchi, 2015; Welker, 2019; Hori and Mori, 2020a; Sarracino, 2024). Other areas include romance

simulation games known as *otome* games (e.g., Andlauer, 2018; Giard, 2024), and the film and television industries in recent years (e.g., Chang, 2019; Baudinette, 2023; Kubo, 2024). However, there remains little scholarship that has considered queerness holistically within the media sphere. This wider lens provides a mechanism to understanding wider dynamics that will persist outside of the ‘boom’ framework and across different media forms and cultural practices.

This thesis also argues for a shift in understandings of the queer media booms that have undoubtedly played an important role in Japan over the past three decades. This builds on the work of Maree (2020), who looked at how booms interacted with the role of *onē* in the Japanese media over the 2000s. In contrast to her approach, which discussed these booms through commodity cycles of boom and obsolescence (Maree, 2020, p. 14), I made use of the Circuit of Culture model to challenge this. Booms are a result of a cultural flows that circulate continuously. While the booms may provide the impression of discrete swells of interest, these cultural flows have never disappeared. Queerness remains an important and central part of the media sphere, though the cultural flows and understandings that surround it may shift.

Through this study I also have sought to highlight the expansive possibilities of a queer approach to the Japanese media. While the background of this thesis has been an LGBT Boom, I have sought to pull away from focusing exclusively on works about sexual and gender minorities as the entirety of queerness in the media. To do so, I focused on media connected to anime and manga, and the fandoms that surround them. As Casiello (2021) notes in a review of Galbraith’s 2019 book on otaku, the long association between otaku media and “reactionary, heteronormative, and misogynist” attitudes has held scholars back from queer explorations of it. This thesis thus builds onto the growing field of studies that take a queer approach to anime and manga and other forms of popular culture in Japan (e.g., Galbraith, 2019; Ernest dit Alban, 2020, 2022; Fanasca, 2021; Giard, 2024). Queerness runs through the Japanese media, and I hope that this thesis has highlighted the multitude of ways that this is visible, even beyond explicit representations of sexual and gender minorities.

This thesis serves as a starting point for deeper studies of the media and the processes that were covered throughout and leaves room for further exploration of the themes found within. For example, building on the discussions surrounding same-sex

marriage and trans rights in chapters three and seven, a future study could focus specifically on how LGBTQ+ activism is conceived of and represented in the media. Moreover, while this thesis draws on observations in the field, it is not an ethnographic work. Future research could build on the discussions of media fandoms in the spaces seen in chapter five through a greater integration of ethnographic methodologies. Finally, the connection between regulation and queerness is an area in need of further study. As I found in my fieldwork, the relationship between legal and political regulation and queerness is a gordian knot, with almost every lead I had led to a dead-end, or I saw significant pushback towards. There is the potential for a further in-depth look that attempts to disentangle this, one that I was unable to during my year-long fieldwork in Japan.

At the start of this thesis, I posed three research questions. First, I sought to understand what defined queerness in the Japanese media. This can broadly be summed by four key terms: ambiguity, balance, fandom norms and *contents*. The emergence of these definitional elements is linked to the second research question looking at the processes surrounding queer representation. Ambiguous depictions that provide a balance between multiple readings are those that are most appropriate for a wide range of groups. From TV Asahi to the participants in my survey, the best form of queer *contents* has been that which can, at least to some extent, be read as things other than queer by different groups of consumers. But queerness is still present and central to driving engagement with the media. It is hidden in plain sight. This links to my final question on the relationship between queerness and the media in Japan. Queerness is crucial to and inseparable from the media sphere in Japan. While these may be more visible at certain times through booms in public discourse, this is revealing of something more endemic to the Japanese media sphere. Queerness is not something linked only to specific subcultures or niche genres but present in almost every facet of the Japanese media. This thesis provided a snapshot of the relationship between queerness and media in Japan between 2010-2024. While this will likely continue to change in the years to come, its importance, unbroken through years of booms, will continue. As the Japanese media and the cultural discourses that constitute it continue to evolve, so too will the role of queerness within it.

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## Appendix A: Survey and Results Tables

Below are the questions asked on the survey and the results for each question. The questions have been given in their original Japanese with an English translation in brackets. All answers in the tables are translated for ease of reading.

Number of respondents: 3,028

Dates of Survey: 6-7 September 2023

Survey Platform: Qualtrics

Survey Distribution: Yahoo! Crowdsourcing

### Intro

本調査は、セクシュアリティとジェンダーのメディア表現や、社会や政治に関する皆さまのお考えをお伺いするものです。約 20 問の質問にお答えいただき、時間は約 10 分を予定しています。

(This survey asks about your thoughts on the representation of sexuality and gender in the media, society and politics. You will be asked to answer around 20 questions and should take about 10 minutes to complete.)

本調査は、サラッシノ・カラム・ヒュー（東北大学大学院法学研究科・金子研究室／英国シェフィールド大学大学院東アジア研究科・ペンデルトン研究室）が研究責任者として、東北大学大学院法学研究科とシェフィールド大学大学院東アジア研究科の研究倫理審査委員会の承認のもと、博士論文のプロジェクトの一環として行うものです。

(The researcher in charge, Callum Hew Sarracino (Tōhoku University Graduate School of Law (Kaneko)/Sheffield University School of East Asian Studies (Pendleton)), is performing this research as one part of a PhD thesis under the approval of the ethics boards of Tōhoku University and Sheffield University.)

調査中には、日本のドラマやアニメに関する画像・文章を見ていただき、ご感想を伺う質問も含まれます。**セクシュアリティとジェンダーに関する内容や恋愛的な描写**をお見せする場合がありますので、予めご了承下さい。

(During this survey, you will be shown images and texts from Japanese dramas and anime and there are questions asking your thoughts. There may be times where you are shown **content regarding sexuality and gender, or romantic imagery.**)

ご回答の匿名性は保証され、モニターとしてご登録されている個人情報は、東北大学・シェフィールド大学及び研究責任者には一切提供されません。また、営利目的や、特定の政治勢力を支援するためのアンケート調査ではありません。皆様のご回答は、ジェンダーとセクシュアリティのメディア表現、社会や政治のあり方に対する考え方を理解する上で不可欠なものです。調査への参加をご検討いただき、ありがとうございます。

(The anonymity of answers will be guaranteed, and any personal data registered for monitoring purposes will never be shared with Tōhoku University, the University of Sheffield or the researcher responsible for this survey. Additionally, this survey is not for commercial aims, nor in support of any specific political group. Your answers are invaluable for understanding gender and sexuality representation in the media, society and politics. Thank you for your time.)

調査へ参加し、質問にご回答いただける場合は下記の注意事項にチェックを入れて進んでください。調査への参加を希望されない場合は、このページを閉じてください。

(In order to participate in this survey, please check each of the following important warnings. If you do not want to participate, please close this page.)



なお、回答の途中でもいつでも参加を取りやめることができますが、その場合は報酬はお支払いできないことをご了承ください。

(You may end your participation at any time while answering, but if you do you will not be paid any compensation.)

【研究責任者】 (Responsible researcher)

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ご質問に移る前に、下記の各事項を確認し、チェックを入れて下さい。

(すべての事項を確認していただけない場合は、調査に参加できません。)

(Before proceeding, please read the following points and place a check next to each. (If you do not agree to all of them, then you will be unable to participate.))

- 本研究の説明文の内容を理解しました。(I have read the explanation.)
- 匿名化されたご回答内容が、論文・書籍・ウェブサイトなどの研究成果を伝える場所で引用されることを理解し、同意します。(I understand that my anonymised answers may be referenced in essays, books, websites etc. that communicate research results and agree to this.)
- 本調査には恋愛的な描写とセクシュアリティとジェンダーに関する内容が含まれていることを理解しています。(I understand that this survey contains romantic imagery and content about sexuality and gender.)

## Section 1:

Q1) 現在のご年齢を教えてください。(How old are you?)

Age Group	Percentage	Number of Respondents
<b>18-24</b>	6.21%	188
<b>25-34</b>	11.33%	343
<b>35-44</b>	15.36%	465
<b>45-54</b>	17.77%	538
<b>55-64</b>	28.86%	874
<b>65+</b>	20.44%	619
<b>NA</b>	0.03%	1
<b>Totals</b>	100%	3,028

Q2) お住まいの都道府県をお選びください。(Which prefecture do you live in?)

Prefecture	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Hokkaidō	132	4.43%
Aomori	30	0.99%
Iwate	21	0.69%
Miyagi	63	2.08%
Akita	23	0.76%
Yamagata	24	0.79%
Fukushima	33	1.09%
Ibaraki	69	2.28%
Tochigi	35	1.16%
Gunma	27	0.89%
Saitama	185	6.11%
Chiba	146	4.82%
Tokyo	388	12.81%
Kanagawa	239	7.89%

Niigata	56	1.85%
Toyama	16	0.53%
Ishikawa	28	0.92%
Fukui	10	0.33%
Yamanashi	17	0.56%
Nagano	44	1.45%
Gifu	43	1.42%
Shizuoka	71	2.34%
Aichi	168	5.55%
Mie	32	1.06%
Shiga	36	1.19%
Kyoto	98	3.24%
Osaka	275	9.08%
Hyōgo	131	1.33%
Nara	42	1.39%
Wakayama	19	0.63%
Tottori	16	0.50%
Shimane	6	0.20%
Okayama	47	1.55%
Hiroshima	66	2.18%
Yamaguchi	31	1.02%
Tokushima	16	0.53%
Kagawa	31	1.02%
Ehime	27	0.89%
Kōchi	15	0.50%
Fukuoka	133	4.29%
Saga	8	0.26%
Nagasaki	29	0.96%
Kumamoto	23	0.76%
Ōita	18	0.59%

Miyazaki	13	0.43%
Kagoshima	20	0.66%
Okinawa	23	0.76%
Overseas	0	0%
NA	4	0.13%
<b>Totals</b>	3028	100%

Q3) あなたは、**ご自身**のジェンダーをどのようにお考えでしょうか。当てはまると思うものを1つだけお選びください。(What gender do **you** identify as? Please select the one that you think fits best.)

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	1,889	62.38%
Female	1,068	35.27%
X-Gender	5	0.17%
Non-binary	12	0.40%
Other	4	0.13%
Don't know	35	1.16%
NA	15	0.5%

**Text input answers (collated):**

Text input answer	Number of respondents
Cross-dresser ( <i>iseisōsha</i> )	1

Q4) あなたの恋愛対象(もしくはご結婚相手)のジェンダー・性別を教えてください。(What gender/sex are you **romantically interested in (or would take as a spouse)?**)

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
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Male	1,050	34.68%
Female	1,867	61.66%
Both male and female	33	1.09%
Other	7	0.23%
Don't know	48	1.59%
NA	23	0.76%

**Text input answers (collated):**

<b>Text input</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
None	5
Gender does not matter	1

## Section 2:

Q5) あなたは普段、どのような形式のコンテンツを楽しんでいますか。当てはまるものをすべてお選びください。 (What types of content do you usually enjoy? Please select all that apply.)

Type of Content	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Not listed	92	3.04%
Anime	1,008	33.29%
Manga	972	32.10%
Dramas	1,570	51.85%
Variety Shows	1,522	50.26%
Online Streams (E.g. VTuber live streams)	668	22.06%
Internet Videos	1,568	51.78%
Novels	811	26.78%
Movies	1,512	49.93%
Newspaper	905	29.89%
Games	921	30.42%
Other	98	3.24%
NA	24	0.79%

### Text input answers for other (collated):

Text input answers	Number of Respondents
Radio	8
TV News	1
News	7
Quiz Shows	1
Sports	20
SNS	2
<i>Shinsho</i>	1
Documentary	4

Fashion	1
Music	5
Nature	3
TV Shows	1
Otaku Activities	1
Podcast	1
I only watch NHK	1
Hobby meetings	1
Subscriptions ( <i>subusuku</i> )	1
DIY	3
Information Shows	1
Stocks	2
Theatre	3
Facebook	1
Point Accumulation Sites	2
Exercise	1
Pachinko	1
Adult Videos	1
Specialist writing	1
Surfing the Web	1
YouTube	2
Livestream	1
Internet TV	1
Travel programs (In-country)	1
None	1
Audiobook	1
Shogi	1
<i>Ōgiri</i> app	1
Blog	1
Live performance	1

Q6) あなたが普段、お使いになっている動画サービスを、**以下の中からすべて**お答えください。 **(Please select all the video services you usually use from below.)**

Streaming Service	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Not listed	324	10.70%
Netflix	325	10.73%
Amazon Prime Video	822	27.15%
Disney+	119	3.93%
U-Next	147	4.85%
Abema	554	18.30%
Telasa	29	0.96%
YouTube	2,407	79.49%
Twitch	78	2.58%
FOD	51	1.68%
Hulu	118	3.90%
TVer	958	31.64%
Other	66	2.18%
NA	24	0.79%

**Text input answers (collated):**

Text input answer	Number of Respondents
Baseball Live	1
d Anime Store	4
NHK+	2
Catch-up Streams (e.g. BS11)	1
JCom	3
WOWOW (inc. on demand)	4
Nico Nico	5
Tiktok	1
Chupicom	1
Igo Shogi Net	1



None	9
DMMTV	2
Apple TV	1
DAZN	8
Sky Perfect TV	1
FANZA	1
Lemino	3
Cable TV	1
Hikari TV	1

Q7) あなたが普段お使いになっているソーシャルメディアを、**以下の中からすべて**お選びください。 (**Please select all** the social media that you usually use from below.)

Social Media Platform	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Not listed	299	9.87%
Twitter/X	1,277	42.17%
Facebook	546	18.03%
Line	2,416	79.79%
Instagram	1,033	34.11%
TikTok	379	12.52%
Pixiv	161	5.32%
5ch	211	6.97%
Reddit	14	0.46%
NA	23	0.76%

Q8) あなたは普段、どのようなジャンルのコンテンツを楽しんでいますか。 **当てはまるものをすべて**お選びください。 (What genres of content do you usually enjoy? **Please select all that apply.**)

Genre	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Not listed	178	5.88%
Comedy	1,217	40.19%
Sports	1,403	46.33%
Romance	652	21.53%
Boys Love (BL)	137	4.52%
Yuri (Girls Love/GL)	81	2.68%
Drama	1,576	52.05%
History	1,077	35.57%
Mystery	1,079	35.63%
Horror	407	13.44%
Fantasy	714	23.58%
Action	921	30.42%
Slice of life	1,002	33.09%
NA	28	0.92%

Q9) あなたは、1日あたりどれくらいの時間、**地上波テレビ**をご視聴されますか。おおまかな平均時間をお答えください。(Roughly how many hours in a day do you spend watching **terrestrial television**? Please answer with roughly your average.)

Hours of TV Watched	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Mostly do not watch	452	14.93%
Less than 1 hour	538	17.77%
Less than 2 hours	781	25.79%
Less than 3 hours	578	19.09%
Less than 4 hours	277	9.15%
More than 4 hours	389	12.85%
NA	13	0.43%
<b>Totals</b>	3,028	100%

Q10) 以下の中で、あなたがこれまでに**聞いたことがある言葉**はあるでしょうか。また、その中で、**意味がわかる言葉**はありますか。(From below which words **have you heard of previously**. Also, from them which words **do you know the meaning of?**)

それぞれの言葉について、当てはまる項目を1つ選んでください。(For each word, please select the option that applies).

※ご回答の内容が謝礼ポイントに影響することは一切ありませんので、ありのままお答えください。言葉を検索して調べていただく必要などもございません。(Please answer truthfully. The answers you provide will not affect the number of points you receive for filling in the survey. There is no need to look-up the words.)

Term	Familiarity	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Queer	Never Heard of it	2,633	86.98%
	Heard of it, do not know meaning	268	8.85%
	Heard of it and know meaning	126	4.16%
		3,027	100%
LGBT	Never Heard of it	330	10.90%
	Heard of it, do not know meaning	913	30.16%
	Heard of it and know meaning	1,784	58.94%
		3,027	100%
Gender Identity ( <i>seijinjin</i> )	Never Heard of it	964	31.85%
	Heard of it, do not know meaning	996	32.90%

	Heard of it and know meaning	1,067	32.25%
		3,027	100%
<i>Yumejoshi</i>	Never Heard of it	2,389	78.92%
	Heard of it, do not know meaning	425	14.04%
	Heard of it and know meaning	213	7.04%
		3,027	100%
<i>Fujoshi</i>	Never Heard of it	851	28.11%
	Heard of it, do not know meaning	1,224	40.44%
	Heard of it and know meaning	952	31.45%
		3,027	100%
<i>Fudanshi</i>	Never Heard of it	1,968	65.04%
	Heard of it, do not know meaning	589	19.46%
	Heard of it and know meaning	469	15.50%
		3,026	100%

Q11) サブカルチャーの愛好者に関するカテゴリーとして、「アニオタ／腐女子／腐男子／夢女子」といった用語があります。(Referring to people who are fans of various subcultures, the terms [*aniota/fujoshi/fudanshi/yumejoshi*] exist.)

あなたは、ご自身がこれらのカテゴリーの**いずれか**に該当すると思われますか、それと思われませんか。1つだけお選びください。(Do you consider yourself as fitting into **one** of these terms or not? Please choose one answer).

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes (One of these applies)	372	12.29%
No (None of these apply)	1,937	63.97%
Don't know	701	23.15%
NA	18	0.59%
	3,028	100%

続いて、政治や政策に関するお考えをいくつかお伺いします。(Next, you will be asked about politics and policies.)

Q12) 多くの人が「長期的に見ると、自分は△△党寄りだ」とお考えのようです。短期的に他の政党へ投票することはもちろんあり得るとして、長い目で見ると、あなたは「何党寄り」と言えるでしょうか。1つだけ選んでください。

(Most people have a party that they prefer when looking in the long-term. **Of course, in the short-term people can vote for other parties, but taking a long-term perspective**, which party would you say you prefer? Please pick one.)

Party	Percentage	Number of Respondents
Independent	43.43%	1315
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	25.63%	776
Japan Innovation Party (JIP)	10.63%	322
Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP)	5.88%	178
Japanese Communist Party (JCP)	3.17%	96
Democratic Party for the People (DPP)	2.94%	89
Reiwa Shinsengumi (RS)	2.18%	66
Kōmeitō (KP)	1.98%	60
Party of Do it Yourself!! (DIY)	0.92%	28
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	0.40%	12
Other (Please Write Details)	0.36%	11
NA	2.48%	75

Text input options (collated):

Text Input	Number of Respondents
The Collaborate Party (formerly NHK Party)	6
Hyakuta's New Party (The Conservative Party of Japan)	2
Japan First Party	1
<i>Nippon kaikaku tō</i>	1
Penis party	1

Q13) 次の4つの意見について、賛成ですか。それとも反対ですか。あなたのお考えに一番近いものを、それぞれお選びください。(Do you agree or disagree with the following four opinions. Please select the answer that most closely matches your view for each.)

Opinion	Support/Oppose	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Sexual and gender minority characters should appear in anime, television shows etc. aimed at children	Strongly Oppose	150	4.95%%
	Oppose	263	8.69%
	Somewhat Oppose	449	14.83%
	Neutral	1,310	43.26%
	Somewhat Agree	552	18.23%
	Agree	224	7.40%
	Strongly Agree	49	1.62%
	NA	31	1.02%
		3,028	
We should teach about sexual and gender minorities during compulsory education.	Strongly Oppose	55	1.82%
	Oppose	88	2.91%
	Somewhat Oppose	166	5.48%
	Neutral	698	23.05%
	Somewhat Agree	1,091	36.03%

	Agree	711	23.48%
	Strongly Agree	190	6.27%
	NA	29	0.96%
		3,028	
Transgender individuals have the right to decide their own legal gender and should be able to change it on official documents through a simple procedure (Gender Self-ID System).	Strongly Oppose	132	4.36%
	Oppose	192	6.34%
	Somewhat Oppose	296	9.78%
	Neutral	969	32.00%
	Somewhat Agree	802	26.49%
	Agree	468	15.46%
	Strongly Agree	135	4.46%
	NA	34	1.12%
		3,028	
We should legally recognise male-male and female-female marriage.	Strongly Oppose	149	4.92%
	Oppose	190	6.27%
	Somewhat Oppose	293	9.68%
	Neutral	845	27.91%
	Somewhat Agree	790	26.09%
	Agree	534	17.64%
	Strongly Agree	191	6.31%
	NA	36	1.19%
		3,028	



### Treatment Group 1 (623 Participants)

これから、**あるアニメ**作品における 1 シーンの画像をお見せします。

その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくご覧になってください。(You will now be shown a scene from **an anime**. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about it, so make sure to look carefully.)

(See Figure 3.1 in the main text for the image)

Q14\_G1) この画像では、**どのようなシーン**が描かれていると思われますか。1 つだけお選びください。(What do you think **is being depicted in this scene**? Please select one answer from below.)

Choice	Number of Participants	Percentage
Man and Woman Hugging	185	29.70%
Man and Woman Kissing	29	4.65%
Two Men Hugging	318	51.04%
Two Men Kissing	40	6.42%
Two Women Hugging	11	1.77%
Two Women Kissing	2	0.32%
Other (Please Write Details)	9	1.44%
Do not know	28	4.49%
NA	1	0.16%
	623	

Q15\_G1) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**地上波テレビではどの時間帯に放送**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **what timeslot do you think an anime with the scene shown above would be broadcast on terrestrial television**? It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Time Period	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Morning (06:00~)	5	0.80%
Afternoon	12	1.93%
Evening	85	13.64%
Night	177	28.41%
Midnight (0:00~)	248	39.81%
Do not know	96	15.41%
NA	0	0%
	623	

Q16\_E1) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**視聴年齢を何歳以上に制限**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **above what age do you think viewership of an anime with this scene would be restricted to?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Age Range	Number of Respondents	Percentage
All ages (no restrictions)	285	45.75%
12+ (R12)	83	13.32%
15+ (R15)	112	17.98%
18+ (R18)	74	11.88%

Do not know	69	11.08%
NA	0	0%
	623	

### Treatment Group 2 (599 Participants)

これから、**あるアニメ作品**における 1 シーンの画像をお見せします。

その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくご覧になってください。(You will now be shown a scene from **an anime**. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about it, so make sure to look carefully.)

(See Figure 3.2 in the main text for the image)

Q14\_G2) この画像では、**どのようなシーン**が描かれていると思われますか。1 つだけお選びください。(What do you think **is being depicted in this scene**? Please select one answer from below.)

Choice	Number of Participants	Percentage
Man and Woman Hugging	6	1.00%
Man and Woman Kissing	138	23.04%
Two Men Hugging	2	0.33%
Two Men Kissing	6	1.00%
Two Women Hugging	11	1.84%
Two Women Kissing	404	67.45%
Other (Please Write Details)	5	0.83%
Do not know	24	4.01%
NA	3	0.50%
	599	

Q15\_G2) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**地上波テレビではどの時間帯に放送**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **what timeslot do you think an anime with the scene shown above would be broadcast on terrestrial television?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Time Period	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Morning (06:00~)	6	1.00%
Afternoon	3	0.50%
Evening	38	6.34%
Night	91	15.19%
Midnight (0:00~)	393	65.61%
Do not know	67	11.19%
NA	1	0.17%
	599	

Q16\_G2) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**視聴年齢を何歳以上に制限**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **above what age do you think viewership of an anime with this scene would be restricted to?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Age Range	Number of Respondents	Percentage
All ages (no restrictions)	94	15.69%

12+ (R12)	96	16.03%
15+ (R15)	213	35.56%
18+ (R18)	138	23.04%
Do not know	57	9.52%
NA	1	0.17%
	599	

### Treatment Group 3 (600 participants)

これから、**あるドラマ作品**における 1 シーンの画像をお見せします。その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくご覧になってください。(You will now be shown a scene from **a drama**. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about it, so make sure to look carefully.)

(See Figure 3.3 in the main text for the image)

Q14\_G3) この画像では、**どのようなシーン**が描かれていると思われますか。1 つだけお選びください。(What do you think **is being depicted in this scene**? Please select one answer from below.)

Choice	Number of Participants	Percentage
Man and Woman Hugging	2	0.33%
Man and Woman Kissing	11	1.83%
Two Men Hugging	10	1.67%
Two Men Kissing	563	93.83%
Two Women Hugging	0	0%
Two Women Kissing	0	0%

Other (Please Write Details)	2	0.33%
Do not know	9	1.50%
NA	3	0.50%
	600	

Q15\_G3) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**地上波テレビではどの時間帯に放送**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **what timeslot do you think an anime with the scene shown above would be broadcast on terrestrial television?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Time Period	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Morning (06:00~)	6	1.00%
Afternoon	10	1.67%
Evening	3	0.50%
Night	119	19.83%
Midnight (0:00~)	399	65.50%
Do not know	58	9.67%
NA	5	0.83%
	600	

Q16\_G3) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**視聴年齢を何歳以上に制限**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください

い。(Generally speaking, **above what age do you think viewership of an anime with this scene would be restricted to?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Age Range	Number of Respondents	Percentage
All ages (no restrictions)	93	15.50%
12+ (R12)	51	8.50%
15+ (R15)	155	25.83%
18+ (R18)	216	36.00%
Do not know	79	13.17%
NA	6	1.00%
	600	

#### Experiment Group E4 (607 participants)

これから、**あるアニメ作品**における 1 シーンの画像をお見せします。

その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくご覧になってくださ

い。(You will now be shown a scene from **an anime**. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about it, so make sure to look carefully.)

(See Figure 3.1 in the main text for the image)

Q14\_G4) この画像では、**どのようなシーン**が描かれていると思われますか。1

つだけお選びください。(What do you think **is being depicted in this scene?** Please select one answer from below.)

Choice	Number of Participants	Percentage
Man and Woman Hugging	30	4.94%
Man and Woman Kissing	230	37.89%
Two Men Hugging	52	8.57%
Two Men Kissing	271	44.65%
Two Women Hugging	2	0.33%
Two Women Kissing	2	0.33%
Other (Please Write Details)	4	0.66%
Do not know	15	2.47%
NA	1	0.16%
	607	

**Text input answers:**

“I cannot tell the sex of the person the guy is kissing.”
“Hug and kiss between men.”
“It is strange to ask us to answer this based on this one scene.”
“Hug and kiss between a guy and girl”

Q15\_G4) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**地上波テレビではどの時間帯に放送**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **what timeslot do you think an anime with the scene shown above would be broadcast on terrestrial television?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Time Period	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Morning (06:00~)	1	0.16%



Afternoon	5	0.82%
Evening	27	4.45%
Night	135	22.24%
Midnight (0:00~)	389	64.09%
Do not know	47	7.74%
NA	3	0.49%
	607	

Q16\_G4) このような描写があるアニメは、一般的に、**視聴年齢を何歳以上に制限**されていると思われますか。推測で構いませんので、1 つだけお選びください。(Generally speaking, **above what age do you think viewership of an anime with this scene would be restricted to?** It only needs to be an estimate, so please select one from below.)

Age Range	Number of Respondents	Percentage
All ages (no restrictions)	133	21.91%
12+ (R12)	104	17.13%
15+ (R15)	193	31.80%
18+ (R18)	119	19.60%
Do not know	56	9.23%
NA	2	0.33%

	607	
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**Post-Experiment 1 Question (Answered by all participants including Control Group)**

Q17) 子供も見る時間帯に地上波テレビで放映されるアニメやドラマにおいて、男性同士や女性同士のキスシーンを、直接描写（放送）してもよいと思われますか。それとも描写しないほうがよいと思われますか。あなたのお考えに最も近いものを1つ選んでください。(In anime, dramas etc. that are **broadcast on television at a time when children are also watching**, do you think it is okay to directly show (broadcast) **kiss scenes between two men or two women**? Please select the option closest to your view.)

Response	Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Okay to show.	Control	75	12.52
	Group 1	107	17.17
	Group 2	80	13.36
	Group 3	57	9.50
	Group 4	91	14.99
	All	410	13.54%
If I had to choose, they are okay to show.	Control	104	17.36
	Group 1	156	25.04
	Group 2	150	25.04
	Group 3	118	19.67
	Group 4	143	23.56
	All	671	22.16%
Neutral	Control	157	26.21
	Group 1	137	21.99
	Group 2	140	23.37

	Group 3	131	21.83
	Group 4	151	24.88
	All	716	23.65%
If I had to choose, they are not okay to show	Control	138	23.04
	Group 1	134	21.51
	Group 2	132	22.04
	Group 3	165	27.50
	Group 4	141	23.23
	All	710	23.45%
They are not okay to show.	Control	120	20.03
	Group 1	87	13.96
	Group 2	95	15.86
	Group 3	120	20.00
	Group 4	78	12.85
	All	500	16.51%
NA	Control	5	0.83
	Group 1	2	0.32
	Group 2	2	0.33
	Group 3	9	1.50
	Group 4	3	0.49
	All	21	0.69%

## Experiment 2

### Group 1 (1,010 participants)

これから、**あるアニメ作品**における 1 シーンの会話の文章をお見せします。その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくお読みになってください。(Next, you will be shown section of dialogue from an anime. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about it so please read it carefully)

(えま) : いいよ。その時私も悪者になるから。ほのか先輩よりゆいの方がいいって。ソロはゆいが吹くべきだっていう、言ってやる !

((Ema): That's okay. Cause I will also become a bad person at that time. You're better than Honoka. You should perform the solo part. I will say it!)

(ゆい) : 本当に ?

((Yui): Really?)

(えま) : たぶん。

((Ema): Probably.)

(ゆい) : やっぱりえまは、性格悪い。そばにいてくれる ?

((Yui): You really do have a bad personality. Will you be by my side?)

(えま) : うん。

((Ema): Yeah.)

(ゆい) : 裏切らない ?

((Yui): You won't betray me?)

(えま) : もし裏切ったら、殺していい。

((Ema): If I do, you can kill me.)

(ゆい) : 本気で殺すよ。

((Yui): I seriously will.)

(えま) : ゆいならしかねないもん。それがわかった上で言ってる。

**だって、これは、愛の告白だから。**

((Ema): Its possible if it's you. I'm saying this because I understand that. **After all, this is my confession of love.**)

Q18\_G1) このシーンには、**2人の登場人物の間のどのような感情**が表れていると思われますか。1 つだけお選びください。(What do you think is **the emotion** being expressed between these two characters. Please select one.)

Choice	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Friendship	221	21.88
Romantic Feelings	584	57.82
Rivalry	38	3.76
Hatred	30	2.97
Other (Please write)	14	1.39
Do not know	119	11.78
NA	4	0.40
	1,010	

**Text input:**

“Ema’s feelings are romantic, but whether Yui’s is attachment or love is unclear.”

“There is love ( <i>ai</i> ), but it is not something someone else should define.”
“Trust and dependence”
“Teasing”
“A deep friendship that is not quite love ( <i>ren'ai miman</i> )”
“The sort of close familiar friendship often seen between female middle and high schoolers.”
“Love ( <i>ai</i> ).”
“A feeling that is more than friendship but less than love ( <i>ren'ai miman</i> ).”
“Pride.”
“Co-dependence.”
“Self-respect.”
“An irreplaceable ( <i>yuiitsumuni</i> ) relationship between Yui and Ema.”

## Group 2 (1,004 participants)

これから、**あるアニメ作品**における 1 シーンの会話の文章をお見せします。その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくお読みになってください。(Next, you will be shown section of dialogue from **an anime**. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about it so please read it carefully)

(ゆうと) : そんなつもりはなかったんだけど、りくのそばにいたら気持ちが悪くもっとわからなくなっちゃいそうで、一緒にいづらくて。でも、避けてるようにしか見えないよね。ごめん、りく。

(Yūto): I didn't mean it but, I got more confused, and it was hard to be together. But it only looked like I was avoiding you. Sorry Riku.

(りく) :もういい、俺も悪かった。それで、答えは見つかったのか？

(Riku): Its fine. I was wrong too. So did you find your answer?

(ゆうと) :両方だと思った。

(Yūto): It think its both.

(りく) :両方？

(Riku): Both?

(ゆうと) :うん。一瞬自分の気持ちに自信が持てなくて無理して頑張ったりしちゃったけど、今本当に楽しい。ただ泳ぐだけで、すごく気持ちいいんだ。俺はやっぱ水泳が好きだよ。でも、そこにりくもいてほしい。フフッ 僕は、水泳も、りくちゃんも、大好きだから、一緒に泳ぎたい。(Yeah. For a moment I lost confidence and overdid it, but I'm having fun now. It feels good just swimming. I really do like swimming. But I also want you by my side. **I love both swimming and Riku, so I want to swim together.**)

Q18\_G2) このシーンには、**2人の登場人物の間のどのような感情**が表れていると思われますか。1 つだけお選びください。(What do you think is **the emotion being expressed between these two characters**. Please select one.)

Choice	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Friendship	453	45.12
Romantic Feelings	413	41.14
Rivalry	35	3.49
Hatred	7	0.70
Other (Please write)	6	0.60
Do not know	86	8.57

NA	4	0.40
	1,004	

**Text input:**

“A phrasing that makes it unclear even to the person themselves whether it is friendship or love.”
“Friendship and rivalry.”
“A feeling of strong attraction to that person.”
“A feeling of close familiarity between members of the same sex.”
“Both feelings of friendship and romance are mixed together.”
“A feeling of meeting a good man”

**Post-Experiment 2 Question (Answered by all participants including Control Group)**

Q19) 「日本のメディアにおいて、同性愛やトランスジェンダーの表現が少ない」

という考えに対して、あなたはそう思いますか。それともそう思いませんか。

1つだけお選びください。 (“**There are not many representations of same-sex love or transgender people in the Japanese media.**” Do you agree or disagree with this statement. Please select one response.)

Response	Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
I do not think so at all.	Control	52	5.13
	Group 1	47	4.65
	Group 2	49	4.88
	All	148	4.89%
I do not think so.	Control	76	7.50
	Group 1	82	8.12
	Group 2	69	6.87
	All	227	7.50%



I somewhat do not think so	Control	80	7.89
	Group 1	82	8.12
	Group 2	102	10.16
	All	264	8.72%
Neutral	Control	185	18.24
	Group 1	185	18.32
	Group 2	171	17.03
	All	541	17.87%
I somewhat think so	Control	329	32.45
	Group 1	324	32.08
	Group 2	321	31.97
	All	974	32.17%
I think so	Control	223	21.99
	Group 1	208	20.59
	Group 2	197	19.62
	All	628	20.74%
I strongly think so.	Control	28	2.76
	Group 1	24	2.38
	Group 2	32	3.19
	All	84	2.77
I do not know.	Control	34	3.35
	Group 1	52	5.15
	Group 2	60	5.98
	All	146	4.82
NA	Control	7	0.69
	Group 1	6	0.59
	Group 2	3	0.30
	All	16	0.53

### Experiment 3 Treatment Group (1,524 participants)

これから、**あるアニメ作品**における 1 シーンの会話の文章をお見せします。その後、関連するご質問をさせていただきますので、よくお読みになってください。(You will be shown the dialogue of a scene from **an anime**. Afterwards, you will be asked questions about its content so please read it carefully.)

(A): **僕は男らしくなんかない。女らしくなんかない。**ただの卑劣な...下衆野郎だ。散々迷った挙げ句わかった答えがそれだった。(I am not masculine. Nor am I feminine. I am just pathetic...scum. After all this worrying [about it] that is my answer).

だからもう、僕を占う必要なんてないんだ。(So I don't need my fortune told anymore.

(B): また同じ答えが出るとは限りませんよ。あなたをさらなる混迷の道へ迷い込ませてしまうかもしれませんが、ここにチケットがもう一枚あります。残念ながらデートに使える代物ではない。デコボッコ教団の次なる標的となる星、そこへ向かうためのチケットです。A さん、もう一度問いましょう。そのチケットを選び、男のまま生きるのか？このチケットを選び、女の体を取り戻すのか？(You won't necessarily get the same answer again you know. It may lead you on a path of even more confusion, but here is another ticket. Unfortunately, it isn't a ticket you can use on your date. It's a ticket to the next star system to be targeted by the Dekobokko Church. Let me ask you again, A. Will you take that ticket [to the movies for a date] and remain a man? Will you take this ticket and return to your female body?)

(A): おっ...お前は一体... (W-who are you?)

(B): どちらを選んでも、きっと、あなたは迷い続けることでしょう。でも、それでいいじゃありませんか。**男らしいとか女らしいとか、そんな**

誰かが勝手に作った価値観があなたの目指していたものだと?そんなもので片付くなら、男も女も、そしてあなたも…俺も…みんなこんなに苦しんで生きちゃいない。(No matter which you choose you will continue to be confused. But isn't that okay? **Masculine, feminine, are you saying you want to aim for those values that have been made by someone else?** If you try to clean it up like that, **men, women, also you...me...everyone will continue to struggle like this.**)

Q20) 登場人物 A のジェンダーは何だと思われますか。1 つだけお選びください。

(What do you think **the gender is of Character A**? Please pick one.)

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	532	34.91
Female	348	22.83
Neither male or female	500	32.81
Other (Please write)	19	1.25
Do not know	120	7.87
NA	5	0.33
	1,524	

**Text input:**

“Transgender”
“They have the soul of a man and the body of a women, but in this scene they also have a male body”
“More male, but you cannot say male or female.”
“This anime is <i>Gintama</i> ”

“A girl raised male.”
“Their body is female, but their spirit is male.”
“Transgender.”
“A person who became a man from a woman.”
“They have a female body and a male soul.”
“Transgender”
“A person born with a female body whose thinking about their own character is that they are more male.”
“Their gender identity ( <i>seijin</i> ) is male”
“Biologically male but their gender identity ( <i>seijin</i> ) is female.”
“I picked male, but I am still unsure.”
“Body is male, soul is female.”
“Someone with low self-esteem”
“Originally female and now male.”

### Post Experiment 3 Question (Answered by all participants)

Q21) 「一般的に、女性には女性らしい感性が、男性には男性らしい感性があるものだ」という考えに対して、あなたはそう思いますか。それともそう思いませんか。1つだけお選びください。 (“**Generally, women have a feminine sensitivity and men a male sensitivity.**” Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Please pick one.)

<b>Response</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
I do not think so at all.	Control	42	2.78
	Group 1	42	2.76
	All	84	2.77%
I do not think so.	Control	115	7.65
	Group 1	90	5.91
	All	205	6.77%
I somewhat do not think so	Control	130	8.64
	Group 1	123	8.07
	All	253	8.36%
Neutral	Control	233	15.49
	Group 1	230	15.09
	All	463	15.29%
I somewhat think so	Control	511	33.98
	Group 1	550	36.09
	All	1,061	35.04%
I think so	Control	336	22.34
	Group 1	366	24.02
	All	702	23.18%
I strongly think so.	Control	104	6.91
	Group 1	91	5.97
	All	195	6.44
I do not know.	Control	26	1.73
	Group 1	29	1.90
	All	55	1.82
NA	Control	7	0.47
	Group 1	3	0.20
	All	10	0.33

## Debrief:

**必ずお読みいただき**、ページ右下の矢印をクリックして次に進んでください。

本調査にご協力いただき、誠にありがとうございました。(Please click the button on the bottom write **after reading the following.**)

【本調査の学術的な背景について】本調査の目的は、セクシュアリティやジェンダーなどのクィアメディア表現・表象が視聴者の意識に与える影響を、サーベイ実験という形式で検証するものです。([About this survey's academic background] This survey's aim is to is verify/inspect the effect that media representations and expressions of forms of queer media about sexuality and gender on viewers.)

本調査の回答者は、3つの実験に関して無作為に「統制群」「処置群」に割り振られ、それぞれ異なる画像や文章を見ていただきました。(The participants of this survey were divided into a 'control group' and 'treatment groups,' and were shown different images and text depending on the group.

各グループ間の回答を比較することによって、様々な情報と回答者の意見の関係を分析することが可能になります。(By comparing the answers of each group, we can analyse the connection between various information and the opinions of participants.)

本調査で用いた画像と文章は、以下のテレビ番組や映画を参照・引用いたしました。(The following television shows are movies were referenced for this survey.)

『ユーリ ！！！！オンアイス』 (*Yūri!!! On Ice*)

『おっさんずラブ』 (*Ossan's Love*)

『革命美少女ウテナアドゥレセンス黙示録』 (*Adolescence of Utena*)

『響け ！！ユーフォニアム』 (*Sound! Euphonium*)

『ハイ・スピード ！！-Free! Starting Days-』 (*High Speed! Free! Starting Days*)

『銀魂°』 (*Gintama°*)

本調査から得られた匿名のデータは今後統計的に分析し、学術研究に活用させていただきます。(The anonymised data taken from this survey will be analysed statistically and used for academic purposes.)

なおモニターとしてご登録されている個人情報、研究責任者には一切提供されません。(The personal data that has been register for monitoring will not be provided to the responsible researcher.)

Q22) 最後になりますが、**日本社会におけるジェンダーやセクシュアリティ**に関して、ご意見やお考えなどはお持ちでしょうか。(Finally, do you have any thoughts about **sexuality and gender in Japanese society**?)

あなたのご意見やお考えがございましたら、ご自由にお書きいただけますと幸いです。(If you have an opinion, please write it here.)

※ご回答の内容が、謝礼ポイントに影響することは一切ございません。(The contents of your response will have no effect on the points you receive.)

Q23) また、もし今回の調査に対するご意見やご感想がありましたらお書きください。(Also, if you have any opinions or reflections on this survey, please write them here).

ただし、個別のお返事はできかねますことをご了承ください。(Please be aware we cannot respond to individual responses.)

アンケートへのご回答をしていただき、誠にありがとうございました。(Thanks for responding to this survey.)

下記のパスワード（ひらがな 4文字）を Yahoo!クラウドソーシング上のチェック設問欄に入力していただくと、ポイント進呈となります。(If you enter the following 4 *hiragana* password into the check box at the top of Yahoo Cloudsourcing you will receive the points.)

## ひまわり

今回の調査にご協力いただき、心より感謝申し上げます。(We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for participating in this survey.)



## Appendix B: Full Statistical Tables

### Chapter Three:

**Table 3.5:**

Coefficient	Estimate	SE	t	p	Signif.
Intercept	4.036	0.098	41.352	0.000	***
Comedy	0.029	0.050	0.571	0.568	
Sports	0.127	0.048	2.632	0.009	**
Romance	0.119	0.063	1.894	0.058	
BL	0.346	0.121	2.870	0.004	**
Yuri	0.310	0.154	2.015	0.044	*
Drama	0.148	0.050	2.955	0.003	**
History	-0.069	0.051	-1.358	0.174	
Mystery	0.126	0.054	2.339	0.019	*
Horror	-0.038	0.072	-0.528	0.597	
Fantasy	-0.050	0.061	-0.816	0.414	
Action	-0.094	0.056	-1.678	0.094	
Slice of Life	-0.069	0.051	-1.348	0.178	
Female	0.227	0.055	4.112	0.000	***
Age	-0.007	0.002	-4.245	0.000	***
Observations: 2901 Multiple R <sup>2</sup> : 0.045 Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> : 0.041					
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001					

**Table 3.6**

Extract	n	Mean	t	DF	95% Confidence Intervals	p	Signif.
<i>Gintama</i>	1,524	4.75	-1.32	2961	[-0.17, 0.033]	0.19	
Control Mean: 4.69							
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001							

**Table 3.7**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>DF</b>	<b>95% Confidence Intervals</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Signif.</b>
Male	532	4.98	-3.24	2019	[-0.36, -0.088]	0.0012	**
Female	348	4.73	0.25	1836	[-0.14, 0.18]	0.80	
Neither	500	4.58	2.41	1987	[0.032, 0.31]	0.016	*
Overall Mean for Treatment group: 4.75							
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001							

**Table 3.8**

<b>Test</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>DF</b>	<b>95% Confidence Intervals</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Signif.</b>
<i>Yuri!!! On Ice</i> (still image)	623	2.90	4.13	1213	[0.16, 0.46]	0.000039	***
<i>Yuri!!! On Ice</i> (GIF)	599	2.95	2.52	1196	[0.11, 0.40]	0.00057	***
<i>Adolescence of Utena</i>	600	3.02	-1.13	1189	[0.04, 0.35]	0.011	*
<i>Ossans' Love</i>	607	3.21	3.45	1183	[-0.23, 0.40]	0.26	
Control Mean: 3.18							
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001							

## Chapter five:

**T-test comparing BL and non-BL Fan's answers to whether same-sex kisses should be broadcast at times visible to children (Scale: 1 = Support to 5 = Oppose).**

Extract	n	Mean	t	DF	95% Confidence Intervals	p	Signif.
BL Fans	137	2.28	-8.36	1217	[-1.89, -1.17]	$2.2 \times 10^{-16}$	***
Non-BL fans Mean: 3.81							
Significant Codes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001							

## Top Twenty Most Common Hashtags in Corpus:

Hashtag	Frequency
<i>Yowamushi Pedal</i>	36,506
Will follow all that rt	9,590
yp_anime	7,714
Reciprocal follow	6,240
<i>Yowapeda</i> (character for pe is katakana)	5,428
If you like one of these anime rt	3,157
Will follow people who rt	1,686
<i>Yowapeda</i> (character for pe is hiragana)	1,307
anime	1,176
Will follow all that like	1,045
Results of UNext anime/manga fortune	1,016
manga	996
UNext	969
Nagase Ren	960
<i>Pedasute</i>	915
If there is one you like rt	868
Will follow all that like	865
Yamashita Daiki	816

Question box	780
Attack on Titan	710

## Chapter six:

### Average follower counts in corpus:

Median follower count: 193

Median follower count (with outliers removed): 150

Mean follower count: 2,626

Mean follower count (with outliers removed): 255

### Top Twenty Most Frequent Words in Corpus (Search terms *Yowamushi Pedal* and *Yowapeda* removed):

Term	Frequency
Saw/Watch ( <i>mi</i> )	40,623
Exchange ( <i>kōkan</i> )	39,389
Periodic ( <i>teiki</i> )	36,025
Anime	33,712
Seek ( <i>kyū</i> )	31,487
Give ( <i>jō</i> )	29,984
Like ( <i>suki</i> )	29,726
Hand over ( <i>jōto</i> )	22,034
[Feel] free ( <i>kigaru</i> ) [to]	19,987
Arakita	19,872
Person ( <i>hito</i> )	19,694
Tōdō	17,631
Onoda	17,484
Makishima	17,185
Manami	16,922
Way/Person [ <i>hō/kata</i> ]	16,781
Episode [ <i>wa</i> ]	15,860
Goods [ <i>guzzu</i> ]	15,458

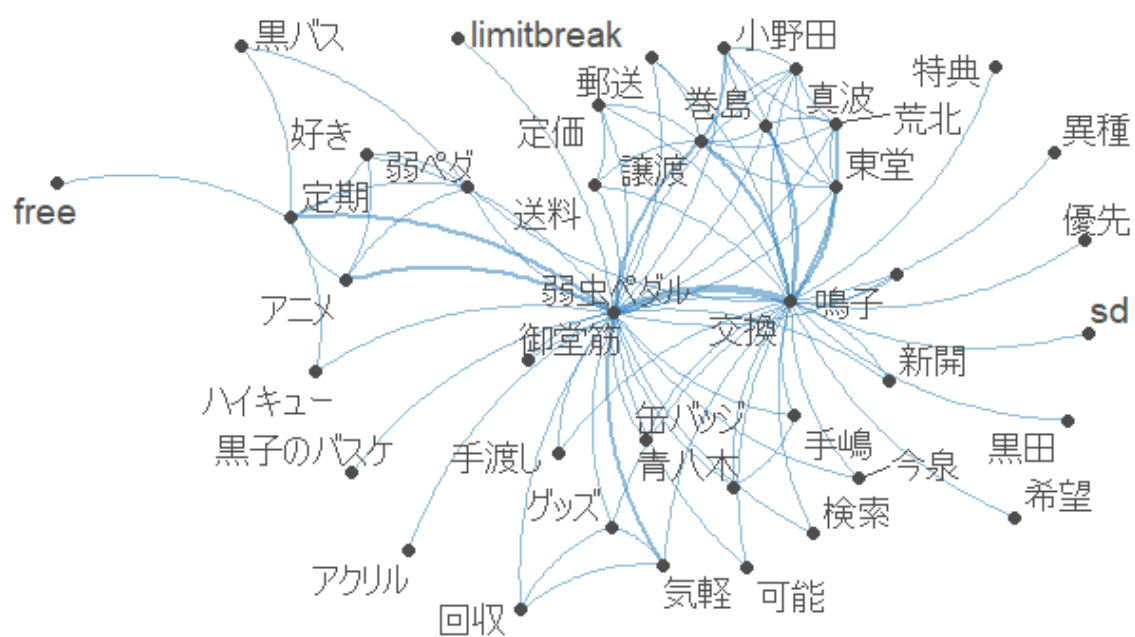
Teshima	15,439
Season ( <i>ki</i> )	15,065

### Top Ten Strongest Collocations:

Collocation	Count	Lambda	z
Set Price, Postage ( <i>teika, sōka</i> )	6399	7.69	310.44
Handover, <i>Yowamushi Pedal</i> ( <i>jōto, Yowamushi pedaru</i> )	11600	4.17	301.86
Exchange, Handover ( <i>kōkan, jōto</i> )	6802	5.367	300.17
Yen, Postage ( <i>en, sōka</i> )	5073	6.867	298.54
Exchange, <i>Yowamushi Pedal</i> ( <i>kōkan, Yowamushi pedaru</i> )	11474	3.19	277.33
Acrylic, Keychain ( <i>akuriru, kīhorudā</i> )	3392	8.17	239.55
Teshima, Aoyagi ( <i>Teshima, Aoyagi</i> )	3133	5.62	239.31
Give, Onoda ( <i>jō, Onoda</i> )	4066	4.44	233.93
Season Number ( <i>dai, ki</i> )	2544	5.56	218.21
Within Tokyo, in-person handover ( <i>tonai, tewatashi</i> )	2912	7.93	213.29

### Alternative model for Semantic Network Graph:

Restricted to words with two characters or more



## Appendix C: Consent Form and Information Sheet

### Japanese Language Information Sheet

#### 本研究の説明書

**研究タイトル:** Depicting Queerness in Japan: Defining ‘Appropriate’ Representation

(日本語訳)『日本でクィアを描く: 「適切な」表象の定義とは何か』

#### 研究目的

本研究の目的は、「LGBT ブーム」と言われている現在の日本のメディアにおいて、性的マイノリティの表現・表象のあり方について考察することです。また、現在日本における性的マイノリティとメディアの関係も明らかにしていきます。そのため、テレビ番組、漫画、アニメといったメディアの分析とともに、メディア業界の関係者と視聴者の感想を含めるため、インタビュー調査に取り組んでおります。本研究は、博士課程の研究論文のため、行っております。

#### 研究参加に関して

貴機構は、メディアの関連組織であるため、本研究に参加いただけるようお願いしております。ご参加はあくまでも任意であり、参加を辞退されても構いません。参加にあたっては、後ほどお送りする同意承諾書への署名が必要になります。参加はインタビュー形式であり、このインタビューの内容は、主に、下記のテーマです。

- 貴機構の目標と具体的な活動内容
- メディア制作の過程
- 映画における性的マイノリティの表現・表象について

このインタビューにおいては、参加者ご自身の都合に合わせ、対面か、あるいは、オンラインで行うことが可能です。オンラインの場合は、メール等の形でインタビュー調査も可能ですので、質問はメールで送付させていただきます。リアルタイムで行うインタビューにつきましては、所要時間はおよそ30から60分程いただき、一回もしくは、必要によっては、二回程、実施させていただく予定です。事前にご用意された質問と、参加者のご回答内容に応じて伺う質問がありますが、ご回答されたくない内容につきましては、お答えいただかなくて結構です。

#### 研究参加の意義

本研究にご協力いただくことで、英語圏における日本の性的マイノリティとメディア業界のあり方の関係について考察を深める重要な意義と役割を果たし、海外における日本のメディア業界に関する理解をさらに深めていけばと考えて

おります。お忙しい中、インタビューへの参加の時間をご検討いただき、感謝申し上げます。

### 研究へのご協力に関する事項

- インタビューにおいては、性的マイノリティとジェンダーマイノリティに関する質問をさせていただく予定です。それにより不安感、又はトラウマをお感じになる場合、参加はお勧めできません。
- リアルタイムのインタビューの際は、録音をさせていただきますので、予めご了承くださいたく存じます。
- もし参加をご辞退されたい場合、その旨をご連絡いただければ幸いです。特定の説明はご不要で、いつでもご辞退が可能です。
  - この場合は、ご自身の録音データは一切利用せずすぐに廃棄いたします。
- 回答できない、又はしたくない質問があれば、回答を拒否していただくことが可能です。
- 研究においては、ご協力いただける方のご氏名を論文で記載せず、年齢と職種（必要に応じて調整可能です）だけの匿名の表記を利用いたします。
  - セクシュアリティと性別・ジェンダーに関しては、ご協力を決定する前にお渡しする同意承諾書に同意いただく場合のみ、研究成果と研究結果及び考察に含めます。
- 参加に際して、大変恐縮ながら謝礼をご提供する事はできませんが、研究が終わり次第、（おおよそ2024年5月に）研究の結果を説明する日本語、あるいは、英語で書かれた要約をお送りします。
- 参加上の懸念がある、又は懸念が出た場合、サラッシノ・カラム（chsarracinol@sheffield.ac.uk）にご連絡ください。
  - さらに、懸念が残されている場合、対応に不満がある場合、その旨をシェフィールド大学東アジア研究科テイラー＝ジョンス・ケイト学長（k.e.taylor-jones@sheffield.ac.uk）に連絡してください。
  - 個人情報の扱いに関する苦情を申し立てる場合は、シェフィールド大学の個人情報保護方針（<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>）をご参照ください

### 個人情報の保護

- 英国の「General Data Protection Regulation」と日本の「個人情報の保護に関する法律」に従って、個人情報を取り扱います。



- 英国の「General Data Protection Regulation」のガイドラインに従って、個人情報を扱い、法的根拠は「公益のタスクを実施するため、扱いは必要」(Article 6(1)(e)) とします。
- さらに、英国の法律には機密と定められた情報、すなわちセクシュアリティとジェンダーに関するデータ、を集めることから、法律に従って、この法的根拠はこの個人情報が必要な理由は「公益、あるいは、科学的又は歴史的な研究目的、あるいは、統計の理由で扱いが必要」(Article 9(2)(j)) とします。詳細に関しては、シェフィールド大学の個人情報保護方針 (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>) にご参照ください
- インタビューに関するデータは、研究目的以外には用いず、シェフィールド大学のガイドラインに従い、匿名の形で10年間保存します。その後、データを廃棄します。
  - インタビューの録音は一切公開せずにパスワード、又は暗号化で保存して、10年間経ったとたん、すぐに廃棄いたします。
- インタビューに関する資料は、パスワード、あるいは暗号化で保護されたフォルダーに保存するか、あるいは、必要性により鍵付きフォルダーに保存いたします。
- 本研究の個人情報を保存しお扱うデータ管理者は私、サラッシノ・カラムです。

もしご不明な点がございましたら、下記の連絡先で私に直接ご連絡お願いいたします。ご協力、何卒よろしくお願いいたします。

**研究者：**英国シェフィールド大学東アジア研究科・日本東北大学大学院法学研究科国際共同博士課程

Callum H. Sarracino (サラッシノ・カラム)

メール：chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk

電話番号：+44(0)7816871994

## English Language Information Sheet

### Information Sheet (English)

**Thesis Title:** Depicting Queerness in Japan: Defining ‘Appropriate’ Representation

#### **Research Objectives:**

This research seeks to understand the way representations of queer people function in the current Japanese media landscape, especially against the background of the so-called “LGBT Boom.” Through looking at this, I then seek to make clear the relationship between sexual minorities and the media in Japan. To do this, I am both performing analyses of texts such as television shows, manga, and anime, as well as interviews with people involved in the media industry and watchers themselves in order to include their opinions. This research is being performed for a PhD thesis.

#### **Regarding Participation**

As a media professional, or a watcher, I am seeking your cooperation. Participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to choose not to. If you choose to participate, you will additionally be sent an informed consent form to sign. Participation will be through an interview that touches on the following themes:

- Your relationship to the media.
- The process of media production.
- The relationship between queer individuals and the media industry.
- The representation of sexual and gender minorities in the media.

These interviews will, depending on your needs be performed either in person or online, and may also be done in an asynchronous manner, such as via email. If online, you will be sent the questions to answer. Synchronous interviews will last around 30-60 minutes, and will generally only be done once, but in some cases with your agreement may involve more. In the interview, there will be a series of set questions, but depending on how you answer, I may ask additional questions for further explanation, but you do not need to answer any questions you do not want to.

#### **Why Participate?**

I hope that this research can serve to communicate to English-speaking audiences the way in which queer individuals and the media operate in Japan and relate to each other, and by participating you can contribute to the deepening of global understandings about the Japanese media sphere. I would be deeply grateful for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in the interviews and contribute to this research and its aims.

#### **Important Notes about Participation**

- As the interviews will involve several questions surround sexual and gender minorities in Japan, if you feel discomfort around these topics, or they are connected to any trauma, I cannot recommend participation.
- Synchronous interviews will be recorded. I ask for your understanding in this matter.
- If you wish to withdraw your participation at any point, you can do so without giving a reason at any time.

- If you withdraw your participation, all data connected to you will not be used and immediately destroyed.
- You do not have to answer any questions you are unable to, or do not want to.
- In all publications and the PhD thesis proper, your name, email address and phone number will not be made public, you will be anonymised with only a description of your age and job (where relevant, this can be discussed).
  - Your sexuality and/or gender will only be disclosed if you agree to it on the informed consent form you will be asked to sign before you begin participation.
- While there is no monetary benefit to volunteering as a participant, upon conclusion of the research (expected around May 2024) you will be sent a summary of the results in either English or Japanese should you wish.
- If you have any concerns at any point while participating in the research, please contact Callum Sarracino (chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk) in the first instance.
  - If after this you feel your concerns were not adequately dealt with or handled, please contact the Head of Department for the School of East Asian Studies, The University of Sheffield, Professor Kate Taylor-Jones (k.e.taylor-jones@sheffield.ac.uk).
  - If you wish to raise a complaint about the handling of personal data, please refer to the University of Sheffield's Privacy Notice for more information on how to do so (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>).

### **Protection of Personal Data**

- Your data will be handled according to the UK's General Data Protection Regulation and Japan's Laws for the Protection of Personal Data (*Kojin jōhō ni kan suru hōritsu*).
  - Following the UK's General Data Protection Regulation guidelines, I am required to tell you that the legal basis we are applying for the handling of your personal data is that "processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest" (Article 6(1)(e)).
  - Additionally, as this involves data defined in the legislation as more sensitive (specifically surrounding sexuality and gender), we are also required to inform you that we are applying the following condition in law: that "processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes" (Article 9(2)(j)). Further information on both points can be found in the University of Sheffield's privacy notice (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>).
- Data from the interview will not be used for anything other than research purposes, and following the guidelines set by the University of Sheffield, will be held in a pseudonymised state for 10 years and then destroyed.
  - Audio take from interviews will not be made public under any circumstances and will be password protected or encrypted in a pseudonymised state and destroyed after the 10-year period.

- Materials produced will be held in a password-protected or encrypted form, or where required in a physical folder that can be secured with a key or code.
- I, Callum H. Sarracino, am the data controller in this project.

If you have any questions, please contact me with the details below. I thank you for your time and hope to be able to work with you.

**Researcher Name:** Callum H. Sarracino

(Cross National Doctoral Course, School of East Asian Studies,  
University of Sheffield/Graduate School of Law, Tohoku University)

**Email:** chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk

**Phone Number:** +44 (0) 7816871994

# Japanese Language Consent Form

## 同意承諾書

論文科目：Depicting Queerness in Japan : Defining 'Appropriate' Representation

(日本語訳)『日本でクィアを描く：「適切な」表象の定義とは何か』

### 研究へのご参加に関する事項：

太字の部分は回答に丸を付けてください	
私は、本研究の説明書を理解します。（いいえと答える場合は相談が必須です）	はい・いいえ
本研究について質問する機会がありました。	はい・いいえ
本研究への参加に同意します。	はい・いいえ
(対面・オンライン)で(同期・非同期)のインタビューに協力します。	はい・いいえ
同期のインタビューに協力する場合、私は録音されると理解します。録音されたと録音の逐語録の制作、そしてそれが匿名の形で本研究に利用されることに同意します。	はい・いいえ
非同期のインタビューに参加する場合、送った回答が直接引用されることがあると理解し、それが本研究に利用されることに同意します。	はい・いいえ
本研究への参加は、シェフィールド大学との法的拘束力のある合意にならず、就職の契約として認められていないと理解します。	はい・いいえ
本研究への参加は任意だと理解します。	はい・いいえ
参加をやめたい場合、理由を出さずに悪影響なしで辞退できることを理解します。	はい・いいえ

### 個人情報の扱いに関する事項

太字の部分は回答に丸を付けてください	
研究者以外に、私の氏名、電話番号、メール等は公開されないことを理解します。	はい・いいえ
インタビューの発言、又は書いた内容が論文、本、サイトといった研究成果を伝える場所で引用されることが理解し、同意します。この場合は、自分で承諾するほかに、氏名等は一切公開されないことを理解します。	はい・いいえ
私は、論文、本、サイトといった研究成果を伝える場所に、自分の(セクシュアリティ・ジェンダー・両方)が明記することに同意します。同意の場合は、自分で承諾するほかに、氏名等は一切公開されないことを理解します。同意しないことはご協力には影響がないことも理解します。	はい・いいえ
私は、インタビューから作られた資料の著作権をシェフィールド大学に譲渡することに同意します。	はい・いいえ

ご協力者の氏名： 署名： 年 月 日

研究者の氏名： 署名： 年 月 日

研究者：シェフィールド大学東アジア研究科・東北大学法学研究科国際共同博士課程サラッシノ・カラム ヒュー (Callum Hew Sarracino)

メール：[chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk) 電話：+44 (0) 781 687 1994

担当教員：シェフィールド大学東アジア研究科ペンデルトン・マーク教授 (Dr Mark Pendleton)

メール：[m.pendleton@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.pendleton@sheffield.ac.uk)

苦情を申し立てる場合の連絡先：シェフィールド大学東アジア研究科テイラー＝ジョンス・ケイト学長 (Professor Kate Taylor-Jones)

メール：[k.e.taylor-jones@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.e.taylor-jones@sheffield.ac.uk)

宛先（全員共同）：School of East Asian Studies, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield, S3 7RA, United Kingdom

# English Language Consent Form

## Informed Consent Form

**Thesis Title:** Depicting Queerness in Japan: Defining 'Appropriate' Representation

### Taking Part in the Project:

<b>Please circle your answer to the bolded sections.</b>	
I have read and understood the Information sheet handed to me. (If you answer no, consultation is required before continuing.)	<b>Yes / No</b>
I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I agree to participate in this research.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I agree to participate in a(n) <b>(synchronous / asynchronous)</b> interview <b>(online / in person)</b> .	<b>Yes / No</b>
Where the interview is synchronous, I understand I will be recorded. I agree to be recorded, and that recording transcribed and utilised in this research in a pseudonymous form.	<b>Yes / No</b>
Where the interview is asynchronous, I understand that my answers may be directly quoted and utilised in this research in a pseudonymous form.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I understand that by choosing to participate in this research this does not create a legally binding agreement, nor does it form an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I understand that participation in this research is completely voluntary.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I understand that if I wish to withdraw my participation at any time, I can do so without giving a reason and there will be no adverse consequences should I choose to withdraw.	<b>Yes / No</b>

### How my information will be used during and after the project

<b>Please circle your answer to the bolded sections.</b>	
I understand that personal information such as my name, phone number, email address etc. will not be revealed to anyone outside of the project.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I understand and agree to that my words may be directly quoted in publications, books, on web pages and other forms of research output. I understand that unless I specifically request it, I will not be named in these outputs.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I understand and agree to my <b>(sexuality / gender / both)</b> being written in publications, books, web pages and other academic outputs where my words are discussed. I understand that if I agree to this information being shared, unless I specifically request it, I will not be named in these outputs. I also understand I can refuse to have this information shared, and it will not have any effect on my participation in the research.	<b>Yes / No</b>
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as a part of this project to the University of Sheffield.	<b>Yes / No</b>

Name of Participation (printed): Signature: Date:

Name of Researcher (printed): Signature: Date:

Lead Researcher: Callum Hew Sarracino, PhD Student, School of East Asian Studies, The University of Sheffield/School of Law, Tohoku University.  
Email: [chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:chsarracino1@sheffield.ac.uk) Phone: +44 (0) 781 687 1994

Supervisor: Dr Mark Pendleton, Senior Lecturer, School of East Asian Studies, The University of Sheffield  
Email: [m.pendleton@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.pendleton@sheffield.ac.uk)

Contact in case of complaint: Professor Kate Taylor-Jones, Head of Department, School of East Asian Studies, The University of Sheffield  
Email: [k.e.taylor-jones@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.e.taylor-jones@sheffield.ac.uk)

Address (for all contacts): School of East Asian Studies, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield, S3 7RA, United Kingdom

## Appendix D: Ethics Approval Letters

### University of Sheffield



Downloaded: 19/05/2024  
Approved: 01/08/2022

Callum Sarracino  
Registration number: 210117990  
School of East Asian Studies  
Programme: PhD East Asian Studies (EASR31)

Dear Callum

**PROJECT TITLE:** Depicting Queerness in Japan: Defining 'Appropriate' Representation  
**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 046405

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 01/08/2022 the above-named project was approved on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 046405 (form submission date: 18/07/2022); (expected project end date: 01/10/2024).
- Participant information sheet 1110435 version 1 (18/07/2022).
- Participant consent form 1110434 version 1 (18/07/2022).

The following amendments to this application have been approved:

- Amendment approved: 04/06/2023

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Clea Carroll  
Ethics Administrator  
School of East Asian Studies

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy>
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/poip/poly\\_fs/1.671066Vfile/GRIPPolicy.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/poip/poly_fs/1.671066Vfile/GRIPPolicy.pdf)
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

別紙様式 2—B

令和 5 年 8 月 3 日

調査・実験実施承認書

金子 智樹 殿

法学研究科研究倫理審査委員会委員長

貴殿による調査・実験実施承認申請（令和 5 年 7 月 31 日付け）につき、  
これを承認します。

記

1. 申請者名： 金子 智樹
2. 研究課題名： Depicting Queerness in Japan: Defining ‘Appropriate’ Representation
3. 承認 ID：2B0042

以上