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*Examination of Sexualized Depictions of Young Schoolgirls in Anime:  
Opinions and Perspectives of Japanese Women*

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**Examination of Sexualized Depictions of Young Schoolgirls in Anime: Opinions and Perspectives of Japanese Women**

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**Abstract**

The prevalence of sexualized images and depictions of young girls has become a common point of criticism from the West, and there have been demands to better regulate such content. This paper examines sexualized depictions of young schoolgirl characters in anime and manga as well as Japanese women's opinions, perceptions, and social acceptance of them, with importance to social and historical content. Using scenes and illustrations from several anime and manga, the sexualization of schoolgirls and criticisms pointed towards them are investigated. These topics were then discussed with Japanese women. Most of them did not approve of relationships between teenagers and adults and were against sexualized images of young characters in anime without proper context, and they have been found to have a more disinterested stance compared the Western criticisms. These results point out that for the most part, the Japanese women shared the concerns of the Western critics towards sexualization of young girls, albeit with more tolerance depending on the context.

**Keywords:** Sexualization, Gender, Anime, Manga, Schoolgirl, Fantasy, Lolicon

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## Introduction

Young girls in school uniforms are a common depiction in Japanese anime and manga. Whereas it could appear as *kawaii* (“cute”) in Japan those female characters are often drawn in sexually suggestive poses, manners, and scenes. The schoolgirl imagery is also commercialized, being used in from idol groups to pornographic content that was concerningly reported in the Western media, news, and articles. Similarly, anime and manga attract global audiences and consequently also criticisms. These criticisms are directed towards the portrayal of women. Many arguments about the sexualization of young girls in manga and anime argue whether it is freedom of expression—artistic expressions and not representative of reality— or a harmful fantasy that enables the abuse of young girls and normalizing pedophilia. Anime fans in the West have raised their voices on their social media profiles such as Twitter to call out such depictions and demanded from publisher’s apology and explanation.

The amount of fictional material sexualizing young girls is large and they have big markets in Japan. The abundance of such material points out certain social factors within Japanese society. It is then called into question what these factors and social dynamics are. This study aims to better understand them in detail in their cultural context and through communication with Japanese women to see how they perceive the phenomenon. The issue of sexualized young girls in anime and manga will be viewed from both sides so that a better judgment on the topic can be made.

As a disclaimer, it should be noted that this research was made with a few amount participants (six women in total) and with no importance given to their backgrounds besides their age bracket and gender. Therefore different sampling

groups can show a different perspective on the issue of sexualization of young girls in anime and manga.

### **Sexualization and commercialization of young girls in Japan**

The sexualization of young girls in Japan is shaped by the historical and cultural gender norms in Japan. Gray (2022) in his study 'Japanese Gender Norms and Their Impact' states that Japan is home to a relatively conservative and group-oriented culture in which social expectations can exert powerful pressure to conform to traditional patterns of behavior—such as men as breadwinners and women being housewives. Japan's deeply entrenched gender norms are strong, yet, in comparison to the West, these norms have been met with far less hostile resistance. Ueno (2019) argues that both becoming a man and a woman means being accepted by men thus supporting Gray's point that men hold power—economic and social—and decide societal norms. Lee et al. (2010) on their study report that women did not typically view their role as housewives as oppressive but rather as a separate and distinct source of power over both the family and society. Ueno and Lee's contributions show that the general gender norm of men holding power over women was not challenged like it was in the West. This unchecked state led them to hold distorted and sexualized views of women based on male power fantasies.

In contemporary Japan sexualization of young girls can be a reflection of adult men's fetishism of school uniforms. Okunuki (2015) expresses that the "*JK businesses*"—translated as high school girl business—date back to the 90's "*buru sera*" a coined word with "*buru*" meaning bloomers and "*sera*" meaning *seifuku* ("School uniform")—teenage girls selling their clothing and uniforms to middle-aged men. This was a product of the social phenomena of commercialization and sexualization of the

80s through to the 90s where the girls themselves were using their girliness and were content with sexualization in exchange for making money. For example, O-nyanko Club, a popular female idol group had their most popular song being titled “Please don’t take off my school uniform” released in 1985 (Ogaki, 2018).

These trends later gave way to a new business called “*enjo kosai*”. *Enjo Kosai* is translated as “compensated dating” and is defined as the practice of older men participating in both economic and intimate exchange with mainly high school girls that includes sex (Kinsella, 2011, p.52). Possible reasons for *enjo kosai* as the decline in the bubble economy of Japan in the 90s and the rise of consumerism in teenage girls, lack of government opposition, and failure to adapt to the Japanese diet were given by Kinsella (2011). The most common customers of the *enjo kosai* business were men in their thirties (Ueno 2003). Lack of proper communication skills, loneliness, and lack of access to sex for men in their thirties were credited as the main reasons for their participation, directing them to immature girls rather than women of the same generation. This reality contradicts the caricature of *enjo kosai* which is the sexual relationship of a young girl with a pedophilic old man who can afford to buy those girls. Instead, it is shown by Ueno that that generation of men in their thirties was born into the commercialization of sex when nearly forty percent of them were single in a time when everything was available with money. This shows that these men had little barrier to being consumers of any sexual service industry and *enjo kosai* girls have then appeared as cheap partners to them (Ueno, 2003, p.322).

Young girl imagery is also present in pornographic movies in Japan. Savage (2015) examines Lolita and schoolgirl pornography in which women are stylized to look as young as possible often in school uniforms. The search identifiers of these

pornographic content are listed as “Lolita, barely legal, petite, and teen” (Savage, 2015, p.39). The concept of “*lolicon*” (a term closely related to “*shoujo*”, meaning little girl) is derived from the Lolita complex from Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (1955). “*Lolicon*” is the infatuation with and idealization of cuteness in the depiction of young girls, and it has become popular in manga (Shigematsu, 1999). Japanese society has been referred to as “loliconized” where “*lolicon*” has come to represent societal desire towards safety, cute, and nostalgia in general (Ueno, 2010). The inability of some Japanese men to form healthy relationships with women their age was another factor. Hashimoto (2015) mentions how a former *lolicon* manga artist admits that he draws stories with young girls in them because of his inability to write adult women characters in his story as he lacks the real-life experience and understanding of older women. Yet he expresses that he could write little girls more freely and more creatively because he found little girl characters easier to write as they lack the agency of adult women.

Yano (2009) accounts intertextual power of Japanese cute with gender and sexuality by being “cute” being about a feminized position born in passivity, then extended outward into various subject positions such as the innocent schoolgirl to lolita sexuality and more. The image of a sexualized schoolgirl is also linked with consumerism and “*kawaii*.” Kinsella (1995) mentions the research where the connotations given to *kawaii* were mainly based on childhood and naivety against the darkness and negativity of the Japanese society —the disappointment of young adults upon graduation with harsh working conditions and a judging society. This relation of *kawaii* with negativity and darkness is noted by Kinsella as “Japanese cute fashion became more concerned with a sentimental journey back into an idealized childhood” (p.241). Sanrio’s popular character, Hello Kitty is a good example of the global

commercialization of this notion of cute (Sato, 2009). The massive commercialization of schoolgirls and the notion of cute did not appeal only to girls who liked cute things but also found a big audience in some men.

### **Escapism and “hikikomori”**

The sexualization of young girls can be a form of escapism for men. Men who showcase escapist behaviors move away from the real world to a world of fiction. The depictions and stories in escapist fiction are altered and distorted versions of the real world. This includes women who are also depicted in a distorted and sexualized way. Hirschman (1983) defines the framework of escapism as; (1) Engaging in activities to cope with unhappy realities; (2) Engaging in activities that let them self-project into roles and characters; (3) Using products to help construct fantasies and augment reality; (4) Engaging in activities to distract themselves from unhappy events. People exhibiting escapism were commonly found to be over thirty years of age, highly educated, and socially estranged. High education and high awareness of the gap between the self and the values of society contributed to escapism (Hirschman, 1983). In Japan Allison (2018) also details that how lack of connections, isolation, marital issues, and high expectations from society and parents are the factors affecting Japanese individuals. These factors lead to escapist behaviors of Japanese individuals such as complete withdrawal from society or extreme hobby obsessions.

In Japan, the extreme escapist behavior manifested in *hikikomori* (“shut-in”). It is described as a social behavioral syndrome where individuals lock themselves away in their rooms in isolation (Zimmerman and Rosenthal, 2012). Instead of moralizing or pathologizing *hikikomori*, Saito (1998) saw it as a complex and interconnected series of symptoms derived from the problems within family structure, education system, and



gender relations. Many *hikikomori* delve into fiction and entertainment such as video games, anime, and manga as a way to avoid reality (Zimmerman and Rosenthal, 2012). Relatedly, *otaku* are people who are obsessed with fictional content such as anime, manga, and video games. *Otaku* is defined as unpopular and withdrawn and is a term with negative connotations (Hashimoto, 2015). While *otaku* show a similar interest in the fictional content just as the *hikikomori*, unlike them *otaku* are not completely secluded from the society and have social circles. Instead of using escapist fiction to completely run away from reality, *otaku* uses it to cope with real life.

Saito's (2000) examination of *otaku* reveals that contrary to popular belief of *otaku*—immature and confused about the boundaries of reality—they have an affinity for fictional contexts, and anime and manga provide them with a safe and perfect space separated from reality. Their desire for fiction is precisely because it is not real. Hiroki et al. (2003) even argue that the West not having safe and defined fictional spaces that can be used as a means of mental relief points out how the West can be less mature than *otaku*. Hiroki et al.'s (2003) argument can explain the moral panic the West has when they are exposed to unfamiliar content in Japanese anime and manga. The explanation is that the Japanese have more and better reading and understanding of fiction and also the border between fiction and reality whereas the West has less understanding of them because they lack those safe fictional spaces.

### **Sexualized schoolgirls in the context of “*shoujo*” and “*lolicon*”**

According to Hiroki et al. (2003), *otaku* use virtual media to possess their objects of love and regard virtual characters as their sex objects. This form of sexualizing of young girls became popular in anime and manga in Japan in the 1980s (Takatsuki, 2010; Galibraith, 2011). In 1989 more than half of manga stories depicted

sex acts (Diamond & Uchiyama, 1999). The collapse of the Japanese economic bubble in the 1980s socially isolated the young Japanese. The resulting economic and social anxieties meant more competitiveness and made it harder for men to pursue real relationships with adult women (Takatsuki, 2010). Some of these young Japanese men then started to favor “pure love” in anime, symboling unbound potential in the form of comforting fiction such as virtual dating in contrast to real—human—to—human relationships (Azuma, 2009).

In the manga genre, parody “*doujinshi*”—fantastic and erotic interpretations of events and characters in a story—have started to be published (Kinsella, 2000). In manga and *doujinshi* specific genres such as the *shoujo* and *lolicon* were added. *Shoujo* are referred to as girls excelling in cuteness which has begun to signify an idealized eros (Galbraith, 2011) and they are the protagonists in *shoujo* manga (Aoyama, 2010). Allison (1996) points out that *shoujo* characters were subjects of the “male gaze.” *Lolicon* refers to a genre in which cute little girls akin to *shoujo* appear in sexual and romantic contexts. The very origin of *lolicon* imagery in manga and anime is credited to Osamu Tezuka’s “*Ayako*” (Nobis, 2017). Tezuka’s drawings of *Ayako* were “soft”, had round faces and big, expressive eyes with a slender body, reminiscent of a young girl (figure 1). Tezuka’s way of drawing characters in manga, especially woman, have then become more popular. The explanation of the mass popularization and the demand for the *lolicon* phenomena were theorized as sexual repression and intimation against adult women (Hiroki et al. 2003).

**Figure 1**Osamu Tezuka's *Ayako*

In the relationship between the *lolicon* audience and the *loli* characters Shibata (2008) examines how Oe Kenzaburo uses the word “*chibi*”—little person, or thing in Japanese and refers to cuteness—in his novel *Silent Cry* when a man is sexually assaulting a young girl. The word “cute” emphasize the rape victim’s small body and vulnerability highlighting the pleasure arising from the desire to objectify and conquer the girl victim. Ueno (2010) writes about how women are made into empty vessels suitable for the projection of desire and delusions through passive and cute young girls. The pleasure arises when the man projects into the little girls through the argument about the absence of the male penis and the face of the attacker (Shigematsu 1999). This is to say that erotic desire comes not from the perspective of the attacker but from the perspective of the young victim. It is an erotic attachment not to a young woman but to an idealized character symbolizing innocence and purity in an escapist fashion (Galbraith, 2009).

In the defence of *lolicon*, Hinton (2014) thinks that the critics often miss the point of the *lolicon* genre in anime and manga in the sense that the *lolicon* is not literal lust after young girls. Instead signifies more complex elements such as isolation, discrimination, and the harsh reality of cold-hearted human adults and is considered subversive just as in the case of Alice in 'Alice in Wonderland' exploring the issues of gender and society (Hinton, 2014). According to Hinton (2014), the translation of "Lolita complex" for the term *lolicon* is not correct and misses the Japanese cultural context. Japanese *lolicon* refers to a subgenre and culture rather than a literal fixation on young girls, however, the word *lolicon* contributes to moral panic in the Western audience (Hinton, 2014). A big criticism and concern of the *lolicon* is that it may harm real children by encouraging fetishism (Savage, 2015).

The effect of consuming sexual content like *lolicon* is discussed by Galbraith (2011) who writes that how individuals consume the media and how they act afterward cannot be determined in advance. He also argues that no abuse happens in the production of *lolicon* which is to say no real children are harmed because it is fictional. Research made on pornography and its effects in Japan showed while the production of pornographic material and its consumption has increased, the rate of sexual crimes did not increase with it but instead decreased, supporting Galbraith's claim. Savage (2015) on the other hand criticizes the *lolicon* genre as serving to promote the consumption and normalization of sexualizing girl imagery. The possible danger of the genre is noted as that it can lead to compulsive cycles reaching out to real-world scenarios that can hurt actual children (Carnes, 2003; Savage, 2015). Supporting this claim, sexual crimes in Japan were committed based on the urge to imitate what has been seen in pornographic content and that 59% of 90 male

respondents who had a desire to sexually assault women had not carried their desire to action watched sexually objectifying pornographic videos (Shibata, 2008).

### **Criticisms of Japanese erotic anime, manga, and video games in the West**

In the West, sexual contexts in anime, manga, and games are heavily regulated (Phoenix, 2006) contrary to Japan where the sexualization of young girls in those media is commonly consumed (Diamond and Uchiyama, 1999). The example of “*RapeLay*”, a Japanese computer game, shows a stark contrast between the reactions of the West and Japan in terms of both legality and social response against media that includes fictional sexualization and sexual violence. *RapeLay* was about stalking and revenge raping a high school girl, her middle schooler little sister, and their mother. This premise about raping schoolgirls is not considered abnormal in the virtual gaming market in Japan but caused a lot of backlash when it was reported in the West and called for legal action. However, the company, Illusion Soft, defended itself by stating that its game was legal in the Japanese market and did not target the international market (deWinter, 2015).

Nakasatomi (2012) states that Western media heavily reporting *RapeLay* and demanding regulation of such content on computer games was the only reason policymakers in Japan acted to regulate such games. The regulation was because of international pressure rather than their consideration and will to legally reform. Japan’s out-of-synch with other developed countries on the legislation of age of consent laws, child pornography laws, and their exclusion of manga, anime, and computer games have been reported, as it has been argued that to do so would damage a profitable video game and anime and manga industry (Hellman, 2014). This relatively relaxed attitude is responsible for the promotion of sexual fantasies with young girls (Ogaki,

2018). As such, creating an International Rating System for such cases was recommended (deWinter, 2015).

Legal action due to the possession of Japanese erotic manga where young girls are depicted inappropriately is exemplified by the cases of Christopher Handley and Dwight Whorley who received prison sentences for reading *lolicon* manga in 2006 in the United States (Masuchika, 2015). Against the need for the jurisdiction of such content, arguments were made by some academics who found juridification unnecessary. Shigematsu (1999) argues that while sexual violence against women and children is real, censoring fiction does not reduce it because the real problem is sexualized content using real actors. The production of them is a serious problem that victimizes real people and real children. For Shigematsu (1999) just by reading the manga, its readers will not become a pedophile or a child protection activist because how individuals consume and transform a media and how they act afterward cannot be determined.

The fear of sexualized children in anime and manga causing psychological harm and cognitive distortions to those who consume them is found redundant by Galbraith (2011). The reason is given as that to their audience it may be symbolizing something else depending on their interpretation—such as “cute”—and not literal attraction to either real or fictional children. In defense of *lolicon*, it has been put forward that there is an imbalance or mismatch of the face and body of young girls in manga with them only having cute, childish faces but also having bodies of adults. While also defending *lolicon*, Galbraith (2011) counterargues that point by writing that regardless of whether it is an adult woman with a childish face or an actual young character, if there is no real crime committed such content and a person's

interpretation of them should not be judged and censored. The contradiction is pointed out as stating what if the characters appear young both in face and physique but narratively are above the age of consent, noting that it is strange to consider legal age and consent for fictional characters (Galbraith, 2011).

In this section, I pointed out that fictional erotic material starring underage girls in Japan as well as showing that there is an ongoing moral discourse about whether Japan's practices are harmless freedom of expression and expression of more complex issues or a potentially harmful practice both for its practitioner's psychology and of young women. Japan's new legislation steps are also visible by them making possession of child porn a punishable crime in 2014 (Hellman, 2014) to Japan's revisions in 2023 to its constitution on consent laws changing the age of consent from 13 to 16 nationwide (McCurry, 2023). Considering the steps taken it is possible that regulations on anime and manga sexualizing young girls could be underway as a compliance and further response to international pressure and criticisms. The current examples of the sexualization of schoolgirls in anime and manga will be investigated in the next section where these media are analyzed in more detail.

### **Media Analysis**

In this section, I chose *High-Rise Invasion* anime and *My Hero Academia* manga to examine the sexualization of schoolgirls and the Western audience's reactions to the materials. I chose them because they are the popular manga and anime outside of Japan and they sparked my personal curiosity over their sexualized depictions of young schoolgirls.

### ***High-Rise Invasion* and sexualization of schoolgirls**

*High-Rise Invasion* is based on Tsuina Miura's manga series that was published between November 2013 to April 2019 and adapted into anime in 2021. The anime series has an age rating of TV-MA (matured audience only) and has warnings for "violence, sexual, and suicide" on Netflix. The anime is about the characters unexpectedly finding themselves in an enclosed strange world of skyscrapers where they either have to fight with masked hunters or jump from the skyscrapers to their deaths. In this anime of the survival and thriller genre, the female characters are sixteen-year-old high school students. The anime emphasizes the bodies of the students, often exposing and revealing their underwear.

In the first episode, a leading character Yuri Honjou finds herself suddenly at the top of a skyscraper where she is attacked by a masked hunter. When two police officers come to rescue Yuri, at least that is what she believes, one of them throws the other from the skyscraper and says: "I am so lucky to be alone with a JK" and starts sexually abusing her. He orders Yuri to take off her school uniform then he unbuttons Yuri's shirt with the katana (figure 2). The police officer's remark stating his win of being alone with a high school girl illustrates adult men's fantasy of sexualizing schoolgirls. He specifically tells her to undress only her underwear and keep the skirt and socks of her school uniform on. Skirts and knee-socks spark an image of a schoolgirl. Thus, Yuri in a uniform skirt and socks gives the officer sexual pleasure—reminding him that the girl he is abusing is a young schoolgirl who he could not get in the real world because of legal boundaries. In the end, Yuri was neither undressed completely nor raped because the police officer is killed by another character. Yuri not being raped is important for the anime to be uncensored in Japan. Because it is



anime and not pornographic content, the implication of sexual abuse is the border for broadcasting. At the same time, the anime attracts its audience by creating a dramatic effect by not showing a rape scene, making the audience imagine that it might have happened.

**Figure 2**

*Undressed Yuri*



The scenes so far illustrate several points: the sexualization of schoolgirls by camera angles that exaggerate so that more of Yuri's body will be shown. It also illustrates the Japanese men's sexual desire for a high school girl and to dominate them. This domination does not have to be physical domination only, but also psychological abuse as the officer enjoys it by pointing his sword towards Yuri. Finally, it illustrates how sexual desires and social pressure Japanese men face in the real world—the police officer's pressure from his work and particularly a hierarchy structure at work—are unleashed in the form of disobedience and sexual aggression when they switch to a fantasy setting.

***My Hero Academia* and Western criticisms online**

Kohei Horikoshi's *My Hero Academia* is a popular *shounen* manga of the action-adventure genre that targets male adolescents. It was published in 2014

followed by an anime adaptation in 2016. Compared to other anime and manga series *My Hero Academia* has less 'fan service.' Although the genre of manga is for male adolescents in Japan, the superhero theme made it one of the most popular series with a big fanbase and it appeals to a wide audience globally. However, occasionally these fans have expressed their discontent about the sexualization of some characters in the manga on their social media profiles such as Twitter.

*My Hero Academia* is about young boys training to become heroes. The characters have both regular school outfits and superhero costumes in accordance with their special power. While most costume designs are safe, some fans criticized a female student named Momo's costume for being unnecessarily revealing for being a fifteen-year-old girl. Momo has the power to create non-living objects with her breasts and torso. As a consequence, her superhero outfit can barely cover the upper part of her body including her breasts because it is the source of her power (figure 3). Even with such an explanation fans have argued that a better design could be thought of and blamed the design on being a fanservice eye candy for men. In the end, against the backlash, manga artist Horikoshi stated that the publication of the image was accidentally chosen in an attempt to meet the publishing deadline.

**Figure 3**

*Momo Creating Matter out of Her Torso and Ripping Her Costume*



Similar criticisms were made to a cover illustration of Hagakure another female student in the hero academy who has the power to become invisible. For this, she must undress. In the manga, she only appears fully on the colored cover of chapter 368—In which she is naked in order to be invisible (figure 4). Naked Hagakure caused controversy amongst the fans. A Twitter thread about the topic surpassed forty thousand likes and for thousand retweets. Some of these tweets are as follows: “For those who see this, this character is 15 years old. If you like this and you are of legal age congratulations you just became a pedophile” (@Sebarino21, 2022). “I really don’t like how many people in these comments are saying it’s completely fine. That is a drawing of a child and is drawn extremely sexually. If you don’t find that disturbing, something is wrong with you” (@Thewilldabeast\_, 2022).

**Figure 4***Naked Hagakure In Manga Cover*

Against such comments, some users have tried to defend the illustration: “As Japanese, this type of art has been normalized in every aspect of manga/anime. As long as the art doesn’t represent a portrait or drawing real that it looks like as a kid, it’s not considered illegal or pedophilia” (@Yuudesu002, 2022). “I understand where people come from when they feel unsettled from a 15-year-old nude girl. That’s a very odd thing to see but I have to say two things one this is from Japan they have different laws and two she’s a fictional character she’s not real she’s art on a paper get over it” (@Aanimekingdom, 2022).

The tweets show that the fans are concerned that it is not moral to draw young characters in such a manner and those who do not object to it are supporting those who are pedophilic. They are concerned that independent from the fact that the character is a drawing, the character is still a minor and should not be depicted explicitly. Certainly, it is much rarer to find sexual depictions of underage characters in

Western comics. On the other hand, the fans who defend the illustration seem to make two main points. First, they argue that it is only a drawing and that people are trying to defend someone who does not exist. Second, they point out the differences between Japan's and the West's laws, habits, and customs.

Sexualization of schoolgirls exists in anime and manga in different aspects. In the example from *High-Rise Invasion*, the appeal of a young schoolgirl is found lustful from the point of a Japanese adult. Explicit sexual scenes playing with borders of censorship are also shown. In the case of *My Hero Academia*, general confusion and complaints from Western fans were shown through their responses in their social network profiles. Their criticisms showed a contrast between what has become a norm and is published without much of a problem in Japan versus what Western audiences find acceptable. In the following section, what Japanese women think of the sexualization and depiction of young characters in anime and manga will be discussed.

### **Sexualization of young girls in anime and manga in Japan from the perspectives of Japanese women**

In this paper, Japanese men's sexual interest in younger girls is exemplified by real-life practices such as *enjo kosai* to sexualized depictions of underage characters in anime and manga. Regarding those cases asked questions regarding teenager-adult relationships in Japan, how common they are in Japan, and how socially accepted they are. From all these responses except the response of Participant A, relationships between adults and teenagers are opposed both personally and socially. Participant A instead found relationships between adults and teenagers as common in Japan and noted how men like young women and how to young women older men appear as

more independent and desirable. This points out that even though these relationships are mostly opposed, some people still have those kinds of relationships. Young girls see these relationships as an easy way to have their economic and social “independence”.

Not all relationships between adults and teenagers were found harmful by Japanese women. The major factor making these relationships allowable is closeness in status and age, for example, a two or three-year age difference where one has reached the age of consent whereas the other has not. Relationships with students and working adults are found to be wrong regardless of their age gap. Participant E revealed that family abuse plays a role in teenage and adult relationships. Her friends who were in those relationships did so because of the abuse they had suffered from their own family and their need for money, having to favor money over their family to not be abused and disappointed.

I asked questions regarding the stance of the participants against the sexualization of underage characters in Japanese anime and manga. It is clear that sexualization, especially sexualization of young characters is unanimously found toxic to society yet it could be tolerated to a degree depending on several factors. The main reason sexualized content was found harmful was the fear that they could normalize and promote these behaviors in real life. The sexualized contents were found as more “disgusting” as the younger the sexualized characters age. Two of the Participants said materials depicting extreme sexualization of young characters were only collected by some “maniacs” —perhaps they meant otaku who enjoy *lolicon* content—and that they did not know where they got these materials.

The tolerance to sexualized content had two factors. The first was the “cathartic” effect of such content. If this sexual content keeps men from committing real crimes and hurting real people they can be excused. The second was the textuality of the “sexual” content. The participants have all agreed that if an explicit image plays a role in a story and conveys another message, then that can be mere fiction and art and not necessarily a sexualized depiction. However, if a sexual image has nothing other than sexual meanings then it is unanimously found wrong and was disliked. Ultimately, their stance on the sexualization of young characters in anime and manga is that even extreme content should avoid sexist and violent approaches because cartoons and comics may reflect real-world values and ethics. The participants highlighted the need for a balance between appropriate content and proper viewing guidance.

I asked Participants' opinions about the backlash against Kohei Hirokoshi from Western Twitter users regarding his explicit illustration of fifteen-year-old Toru Hagakure. It is clear that for the most part, the participants did not feel the need to strongly oppose the illustration as was the case with the Western fans. Generally, this particular example of Toru Hagakure is not found an issue because the character's power, the story, and the illustration made sense context-wise, and the character's age was not as apparent to mark her as an underage girl as Participant C noted. Even so, it is also accepted that men who regularly consume inappropriate drawings of young girls can indeed be pedophilic as the Western criticisms argue. Participants' answers show their real concern being about content degrading and normalizing such sexualized and abusive behavior towards women and kids, which they mostly did not feel was the case with this particular drawing.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the reasons behind the sexualization of young girls in anime and manga in Japan and Japanese women's reactions to it. It is concluded that the sexualization of young schoolgirls in anime and manga in modern Japan is attributed to Japan's post-bubble economy. The collapse of the economic bubble created a more competitive Japanese society. Resulting economic challenges brought with them social anxieties. These harsh environments put great pressure on Japanese adults which caused isolation within the population. These socially troubled men showcased examples of extreme escapist behavior such as not being able to form relationships with real, adult women and starting to find comfort in fictional, young, and cute girls. These girls were "ideal" to these men because they were fictional, away from the realities and hardships of social life, reminding them of their careless and naive childhood.

Young girls in anime and manga themselves then became commercialized with them still being easy to observe in contemporary anime and manga. As anime and manga become popular, these depictions have crossed the cultural boundaries of the West. What has become the norm and normalized in fiction in Japan has caused confusion and backlash among Western viewers, which was illustrated in the example of a cover drawing in *My Hero Academia*. Western audiences have occasionally voiced their discomfort with the inappropriate and unnecessary sexual depiction of underage characters in their favorite shows. They have accused people who enjoy such content as being weird if not pedophilic. The abundance display of



sexual content about young characters has led some fans to believe that the age of consent law is different in Japan and that sexual relationships with underaged girls are socially accepted.

Against these thoughts, the results of the interviews with Japanese women showed a different picture. Most of the respondents have expressed how they do not think such relationships are normal and how it is not socially or legally accepted. Similarly, they found sexual depictions of women and young girls in fictional media inappropriate and expressed their negativity towards it. Those who enjoy such material are described as odd such as *hikikomori* or *otaku*. The Japanese women's dislike of *lolicon* content and its consumers contrasts the idea that the *lolicon*, *hikikomori*, and *otaku* who are fixated on them are socially accepted in Japan. Even so, Japanese women—albeit disliking the sexualization in anime and manga—showed a better tolerance and understanding if there was a proper explanation for “inappropriate” content and were not found as harsh as Western audiences. Japanese women's reaction to working adult men showcasing interest in school-aged girls reveals that they think of such men as very immature, lacking self-esteem, and wanting control. At the same time, their comments also show that they think of men who show these traits as “very Japanese”. This phrasing implies that even though relationships between adult men and teen girls are disliked by society in general, it still exists and is practiced by some Japanese men.

I want to add that with a bigger sample size and inclusion of Japanese men this study can be expanded to different perspectives regarding the issue of sexualization of young girls in anime and manga (perspectives of men, or a

comparative study between Japan and the West) with a more detailed face-to-face interview process.

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