DEPICTIONS OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN JAPANESE MANGA AND ANIME

Sarah Huerta
Department of Sociology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Research Questions

- Who is reading/watching Japanese manga/anime in the United States?
- Why should researchers care about Japanese comics in reference to sexuality and gender?
- What are similarities and differences in gender and sexuality as displayed in Japanese anime/manga and popular US media such as magazines?
- What are the social implications for the nonwestern gender and sexuality themes portrayed in anime/manga?
Introduction to Anime and Manga

- *Manga* are essentially Japanese “comics” which are enjoyed by all age demographics in Japan equally.

- *Anime* is the animated version of manga that airs on major Japanese networks such as Tokyo TV.

- Manga sales account for nearly half of all publishing sales in Japan.

- Since being imported into the US, manga sales have increased 350% (2002-2007); a majority of readers are adolescent females.
Manga was not solely an art form but also a political and social tool.

Manga became commercialized and widespread in Japan during the Edo period due to the advent of wood blocking.

Manga was not only a medium for politics and art, but also for sexual purposes, i.e. wife sexual instruction.

The Tokugawa period (1600-1868) demonstrated especially conspicuous literary and artistic portrayals of normative male homosexuality.
**Gender and Sex in Japanese Anime and Manga (Femininities/Female Sexuality)**

- *Shoujo* femininity idealism is a common theme in Japanese media, which places Japanese women and girls within a rigid, binary position - a helpless, selfless, needy and domestic girl

- *Shoujo* is further defined by the linguistic positions of *kawaii* and *kawaiisou*

- Sexuality and gender among *redikomi* (adult women’s) manga still struggle within the ideal of the young girls’ *shoujo* concept – now they are an absence of *shoujo*

- In men’s comics women are limited, domestic, secondary and/or in support roles
Masculinities in manga include muscular, powerful men who have limited emotional ability and solve problems through fighting and competition.

Well-intentioned, hard-working simple “everymen” who long for “good girls” – these are future or current salarymen.

Bishounen, shounen-ai and yaoi represent the male ambiguous gender identity made popular, eroticized and highly desired during the Tokugawa period.
Mainstream media female gender identity: submissive, non-threatening or constantly sexually aroused and heteronormative

Women and girls in U.S. media center on attractiveness to males with no attention to female sexuality, pleasure or desire

Music videos tend to portray traditional gender and sexuality behaviors/roles

Masculinity in U.S. – hypermasculinity and positive promiscuity

Mens mags- body-consciousness and muscularity, action and sexual performance
Males portrayed ideally as “salary/company men”
- Men are heterosexual, married or with a girlfriend
- Providing via wage work is essential to this construction
- In their leisure time, men are typically depicted as away from home and family, engaged in sports/outdoor activities

- In American media, the metrosexual is assumed to be or labeled as gay
- In Japanese media, there remains a legitimate masculinity that involves “traditionally feminine” traits - *bishounen*
  - With this construction of masculinity, there is no general assumption of sexuality; gender behaviors and sexual orientation are separate
Japanese *shoujo* concept is similar to American adolescent and young women constructions in that women are portrayed as dependent, heteronormative and preoccupied with fashion, beauty and body size

- American females depicted as defiant and challenging to the viewer
- However, *shoujo* girls exemplify “girlishness” and *kawaii* concept

Contrasted to Japanese sex positivity, American female sexuality tends to be secret, stigmatized and heavily associated with disease contraction and unwanted pregnancy – abstinence is considered virtuous

- In Japan, condoms are offered out of vending machines – sexuality is not divorced from everyday life
Conclusion

- Gender and sexuality in anime and manga is similar in many ways to American popular media gender/sex displays – however, with important culturally contextual differences.

- Reasons for these differences tend to be rooted in social, political and religious historical foundations and have survived the westernization of the Meiji restoration.

- Anime and manga are such examples of Japanese media gender and sexuality differences and are now widely enjoyed by (largely adolescent) U.S. audiences on a wide scale.

- Though manga/anime have become infused into American culture, this media provides a unique way of engaging adolescents and young people in the US about gender and sexual constructions which are uncommon in their cultural milieu.