

Brisa Rosiles

12 Nov. 2023

Professor Romano

JAPN 311

Anime & Manga: Revealing Sexism in Japan

One of the aspects for which Japan is recognized worldwide is its distinctive way of telling stories through art and animation. Through an immense catalog of anime and manga titles, we met the Japan of heroes, magicians, villains, monsters, etc.: a legacy that earned a place within popular culture and a distinctive seal in the world. However, although we can say many positive things about the Japanese entertainment industry, we cannot ignore those thorns of scenes of sexual harassment and predatory behavior as well as objectification and hypersexualization of female characters. It is not about censoring topics of this type because there is an effective way to represent social issues through artistic means, but the way in which the Japanese media portrays them tells us a lot about their social core and the problems they have with sexism, and how they have been dealing with it. For this reason, the hypersexualization and objectification of women in Japanese entertainment media is not only a mirror that reflects the ideas of their society, but also an aspect that contributes to the normalization of sexual harassment in Japan, precluding the problem from gaining political relevance and preventing change from being generated in favor of Japanese women.

Hypersexualization and objectification of women in Japanese entertainment media

As an avid consumer of Japanese entertainment, I always wondered if it was normal that there were so many male characters who liked to harass women; I wondered if it was normal for female characters to not give importance to harassment and in many cases end up in a

relationship with their harasser. For a long time, I ignored scenes of harassment, objectification and sexualization, believing that it was something cultural that I did not understand, and I continued consuming series after series, manga after manga, without questioning whether having normalized these instances was part of the problem. As I learned about the sociocultural and political sphere of Japan, I realized that in fact it represents a problem for them too, and it is not about what I once assumed was “cultural acceptance.” For this reason, the objective of this work is to show how problematic it is to take advantage of this type of female representation that in many cases can become a behavioral model for developing adolescents or a validation of questionable behavior for adults. The intention is not to demonize “sexual” content that aims to attract a specific audience, but to analyze how it is portrayed and for what reason, since there are modern examples of anime and manga that do it in a reasonable way.

In general, it can be said that Japan has a big problem with the hypersexualization of female characters, as “Women just get sexualized and objectified for no reason... not related to the plot, not trying to make any point about our society, not trying to make a point about how women are depicted. They are simply depicted in an oversexualized manner just to sell the product” (The Kavernacle, 2022, 6:38-6:54). When we see these kinds of scenes that happen out of nowhere, that have no purpose to the story, without context, that happen just because, or as “comedic relief,” it is known as “fan service:” to please the audience. This term mainly includes the male gaze, but also comprises the female gaze, since fan service directed towards women has been exploited more recently with the increase in female audiences for *shōnen* and *seinen*. However, the male gaze offers more points of concern, since it is tied to the issues of objectification, and the attitudes towards sexual harassment represented in the shows in question.

For this reason, I will introduce the term male gaze in the next paragraph and its connection with the topic of analysis.

Male Gaze

In the case of male gaze, it is very common for genres aimed at a male audience, such as *shōnen* (young boys) or *seinen* (young adult men), to have very few female representation, and if they do, is usually to fulfill the roles of mothers, love interests, or just support characters. In many cases, regardless of the character's role, they are subject to sexualization, generally represented as women with idealized bodies with large breasts, small waists, prominent buttocks, and thick legs. This is accompanied by the type of clothing they usually wear that generally exposes the body, such as tops with exaggerated necklines or very short skirts, and garments that hug the body with the same intention of exposing the female body in a sexual way. Apart from the way in which the female characters are designed, the framing is also important when generating fan service, since “the usage of camera angles in the same way as men sexually stare at female bodies is one of the most visible characteristics of male gaze” (Wuttanon, 2021). Thus, we can find scenes where we just see the character’s breast as if we were looking down on her, or scenes where when they fall, we can see under their skirts, among other depictions.

An example of this is Momo Yaoyorozu, a character from the popular manga/anime *My Hero Academia* (MHA for short). Under the *shōnen* genre, MHA is about kids with superpowers (quirks) who go to a special school to become heroes. Each of the characters acquires a special suit that serves their specific quirk. Momo’s quirk is creating unanimated objects from her exposed skin. For this reason, her suit consists of a leotard with a deep and open cleavage exposing her breasts, and two belts around her waist and one above her chest. This makes sense for her, as she needs access to large areas of exposed skin to create objects, and there would be

no issue with her design if it weren't for a male character, Mirio Togata, who appears later in the series. Mirio's quirk makes it possible for him to pass through solid matter, but only when he is naked, and he has to undress every time he is about to engage in battle. One would think this is the male equivalent of Momo, since we can see Mirio being sexualized, offering "fan service" for the female audience. However, Mirio receives a suit that covers his entire body, one that allows him to use his quirk without the need to get naked, making it evident that Momo's suit exists just as a candy eye for the male audience: fan service, as her suit goes unjustified compared to Mirio's.

Just as it happens with MHA, other *shōnen* and *seinen* animes/mangas do the same to their female characters: Elizabeth from *Nanatsu no Taizai*, Hinata from *Naruto*, Rei from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Nami from *One Piece*, Orihime from *Bleach*, Tamaki from *Fire Force*, Riko from *Made in Abyss*, among others; all of them reduced to their bodies, facing objectification. Some of them even began as realistic female representations, which did not focus on their body, but rather on their skills, whether fighting or intelligence. But due to pressure from the male audience who asked for "fan service," little by little they began to lose clothing pieces, their breasts enlarged, their waists shrank, and their fight scenes framed their moves to "appreciate" their physical attributes, just as it happened to Nami and Orihime.

Normalization of sexual harassment through entertainment media.

Now that the term male gaze and its function within the creation of these animes/mangas has been explored, it is necessary to talk about the role that some male characters have in these stories, specifically those who act in a perverted manner. Within these genres, there is a very common trope of the male character, who exhibits obsessive interest in the female characters of their respective shows. This character usually sexually harasses girls without receiving any kind

of call for attention or “justice,” and if they do, they never reflect on their actions and continue harassing. What is concerning is that this behavior is usually framed as comedy with the intention of "justifying" the actions of the character in question. Examples of this trope exist as side characters such as Mineta from MHA, or protagonists such as Meliodas from *Nanatsu no Taizai*. In the case of Mineta, his character makes it clear to us that he wants to be close to his female classmates to take advantage of any moment to touch them without their consent or spy on them while they are changing their clothes or taking a bath. As mentioned before, usually these characters do not receive any type of punishment for their behavior. In this case, we see that the only times Mineta receives physical damage is when he touches the body of the heroines. When he has not been successful, or mentions his dirty intentions with the women in the class, he just gets the occasional look of disgust from the rest of his male classmates, but they also fail to stop him or do something, as it is just a regular occurrence. It is evident that the heroines feel uncomfortable when he is around, but what he does is always left aside, so he continues this behavior non stop.

We can say exactly the same about Meliodas' behavior. The difference is that he is the protagonist. If Mineta does not receive some type of punishment being a side character, Meliodas being the protagonist cannot be given the label of harasser because he is the main "hero" of his story, and the one for whom we should “root for.” Throughout the anime, there are countless scenes of Meliodas indecently touching Elizabeth without her consent, even though she has let him know that she finds it uncomfortable and dislikes it. The problem of Meliodas and Elizabeth is even worse when, being the main couple, we are forced, like Elizabeth, to let Meliodas do what he wants under the excuse of “eternal love.” This attitude towards sexual harassment is even more concerning when Meliodas reveals that he does it because “it's not the same when

they let you.” Both Mineta and Meliodas' scenes are unnecessary for their respective plots, since they can be removed and would not affect the course of the story. In both cases, these scenes are treated as “humor” and “comedic relief,” but there is nothing funny about them. In any case, they are annoying, disgusting, and enough to make someone lose interest in the product, as it happened to me.

So far,

we have observed...[that] a lot of anime and manga tend to romanticize sexual harassment behavior to demonstrate that it is acceptable for male protagonists to whether purposefully or unintentionally sexually touch female characters without their consent and design tight and too much revealing clothes for the female characters or even let the female characters engage in unnecessary nudity scenes for no apparent reason.

(Wuttanon, 2021)

But how does this translate into real life? To this day, Japan has been dealing with the enormous problem of sexual harassment and abuse for years, to the point that for Japanese women, it has become an uphill battle to get Japan to recognize that they have a problem in the first place. This is because historically, Japan did not have a name for this kind of behavior, since it was seen as an ordinary occurrence and therefore unimportant. To this, we add the gender roles that are still strongly rooted in Japanese culture: the housewife who is docile and calm, and the man in charge of providing for his family, the one who has the voice of command. Along with these gender roles that force Japanese women to settle for being passive and silent, there is also the concept of *wa* that comes from what Yuki W. P. Huen describes as social harmony where

Individuals tend ...to avoid confrontation and conform to social norms. Simply put,

Japanese culture promotes conformity with passive social norms and avoids confrontation

with others. [This has significant implications for women, since]... From childhood, Japanese women are told to follow their peers and “go with the flow.” This emphasis on group ethos rather than individualism makes it difficult for women to speak up about their sufferings related to sexual harassment and other forms of gender discrimination.

(2007)

Because of this, Japanese women are expected to remain oblivious to unwanted sexual advances/contact, so as not to disrupt that so-called social harmony because that would bring shame and embarrassment.

Sexual harassment has been ignored by the government and by society for so long that it has become normalized, it is not talked about and ignored. Although in the 1980s, Japan adopted the term *seku-hara* from English, to date there is no trial process for cases of sexual harassment as it is not recognized as a crime. In general, the attitude of Japanese society towards this issue is indifference, and this same attitude is found within conversations about the sexualization of women in manga/anime and the use of sexual harassment as comedic relief. If popular culture does not generate a change in female representation and male attitudes towards this issue in a medium that is mainly aimed at a young male audience, it is possible that these acts serve as confirmation to behave as Mineta or Meliodas, to remain silent and avoid confrontation as Elizabeth, and let the harasser continue his deplorable actions by doing nothing as the rest of the male characters of MHA. Therefore, the frequency with which products are created with these tropes, and the little discussion about the negative aspects they illustrate, contribute to the normalization of sexual harassment as harmless in real life. Much so, that it becomes a repetitive cycle that encapsulates these types of conversations and does not allow Japanese women to talk

about their experiences without being blamed for what happened to them, either by those who surround them or politicians and people in power.

Repercussions and correlation with the slow modification of laws on sexual harassment.

Returning to what was mentioned above, both the behavior of the characters within *shōnen* and *seinen* regarding sexual harassment, as well as the audience's attitude of downplaying the problem, also translates into the indifference of the government and their lack of legal responsibility. One would expect that since it is such a big problem that it has not been properly resolved for years, the government of a first-world country would be discussing strategies to improve the living conditions of its female citizens. Instead, we get public statements such as the one given by the Minister of Finance Taro Aso: “there is ‘no such thing [crime] as a sexual harassment charge,’ and ‘there would not be any sexual harassment incident if only male reporters cover the Finance Ministry’”(Miura 2021), or public written statements such as the one by Eitaro Ogawa, an author and an unofficial mouthpiece of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe: “The deepest suffering belongs to the men who are plagued with the symptoms of train groping syndrome in which his hand automatically moves when he steps on a packed train and catches a whiff of a woman”(Adelstein 2018). As we can see, within Japanese politics there is also the idea that sexual harassment/abuse is not something important, and to make the situation worse, many politicians emphasize that the problem exists because women cause it, reinforcing gender roles that seek to prevent women from being part of spaces of power, work and education. One of the reasons why there is this opposition to criminalizing sexual abuse/harassment is due to three aspects: the first is that Japanese women are underrepresented within the political sphere, which is why it has been difficult to introduce constitutional changes from the female perspective; second, although some women manage to make a place for

themselves within this space, some of them may modify their political integrity in order to be accepted within the majority group, in this case, that of middle-aged and older men. One example of this happening can be read in the next headline: “Last month, Japanese lawmaker Mio Sugita caused outrage on social media when she said that some women lie about sexual assaults... She has also victim-blamed Shiori Ito...by stating her alleged rape was due to ‘clear errors on her part as a woman’” (Jozuka & Wakatsuki 2020). The third aspect is that the men in power benefit from that system of abuse, since, as happens in the spheres of work and education, female politicians experience sexual abuse/harassment and bullying in general: “Of the 1,247 female local assembly members surveyed, 57.6% said they had been sexually harassed by voters, supporters or other assembly members. Many said they had been targeted with sexually explicit language or gender-based insults” (McCurry 2021). What this tells us is that within the political sphere many male politicians may be exhibiting this type of abusive behavior. Therefore, it makes sense that they do not actively seek to reform the law to recognize the penalty of these actions, because they benefit from the fact that they can easily get rid of the accusations and escape justice by being part of the system of power.

Then we see how the indifference of the general public is connected with the political perception of sexual harassment. Because many defend its existence as "just fiction" or define it as “harmless,” conversations that seek social change fail to catch fire and therefore fail to reach the political sphere. However, once the anime/manga audience spread to the rest of the world, comments pointing out the issue of hypersexualization and sexual harassment began to fill internet forums connecting the voices of women around the world in support of Japanese women, generating social pressure to change the model of female representation within the Japanese entertainment industry.

Change through the international expansion of the Japanese entertainment market.

To prove my thesis that thanks to the internationalization of the Japanese entertainment industry, conversations have been opened about what is not accepted in other cultures about sexual harassment, and has pushed creators and companies to change the type of "fan service" that they offer, I interviewed a friend from Japan about the changes, if she has noticed them, that the *shōnen* and *seinen* genres have received in terms of female representation. She reported the following:

In recent years, the sexual harassment problem is getting bigger [has gained attention], like, around the world, not only in Japan...and because this problem got bigger people started to see anime [and manga] as a problem, but before that [referring to a period of 10 years], I think that people were less sensitive (R. Terada, personal communication, November 22, 2023).

By less sensitive, she remarks this attitude of "it's just fiction," as she later mentions, people used to say that if the anime/manga you were watching/reading made you happy, then there was no issue with the way they portrait sexualization and sexual harassment. When asked about the changes in peoples' attitude, she said:

[About] a year ago, MHA, the author of MHA posted one of the characters, I forgot her name, but she was naked. He posted that on Twitter... and a lot of people said 'no, it's not good.' When I found it, I felt like 'oh, something had change' because a few years ago no one said it's a problem.

Thanks to her internal point of view, I can say that indeed, international fan bases have started a small movement for change, which has resulted in the creation of modern titles such as *Attack on Titan*, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, and *Chainsaw Man*, among others, with excellent female representation

such as Mikasa/Annie/Sasha/Historia, Nobara/Maki, and Makima/Power/Himeno respectively, little to non-existent sexualization, and better handling of the trope of the character obsessed with women. This last one is in reference to Denji from *Chainsaw Man*. Although his only motivation for being the antihero of his story is to sleep with a woman and touch her, Denji at no time harasses any of the girls in the show. He even touches Power's breasts on one occasion, but it is because she has given him her consent.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have shown that popular culture plays a very important role in the perception of the social problems of a specific community, in this case, a country. It is not only a mirror that reflects the ideas of their society, but also becomes an aspect that contributes to the normalization of sexual harassment in Japan. However, now that audiences with other points of view on issues that affect the integrity of women have begun to consume this type of entertainment, they have not hesitated to point out how uncomfortable it is to watch these types of scenes, and have started to question their purpose, joining and amplifying the voices of Japanese women to pressure their social and political spheres for change. Just as all the negative aspects of society in general translated into negative attitudes of law makers, perhaps this new and stronger vision on sexual harassment can exert enough social pressure so that the laws are changed and Japanese women can enjoy visibility and security.

Bibliography

- Adelstein, J. (2020, February 18). *In Japan, promoter of gropers is tip of right-wing, sexist iceberg*. Asia Times.
<https://asiatimes.com/2018/09/in-japan-promoter-of-gropers-is-tip-of-right-wing-sexist-iceberg/>
- Animerose. (2020, March 23). *Anime in America: The adverse affect on women*. The Artifice.
<https://the-artifice.com/anime-women/>
- Goto, E. (2023). Translating "sexual harassment" in japan and egypt: Conception and perception on the move. *Internationales Asien Forum. International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 54(2), 173-190. doi:<https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2023.2.22457>
- Govil, S. (2020, April 27). *10 times anime normalized extremely questionable acts (which you never realized)*. CBR.
<https://www.cbr.com/anime-extremely-questionable-acts/#consent-has-no-meaning>
- Huen, Y. W. P. (2007). Workplace sexual harassment in japan: A review of combating measures taken. *Asian Survey*, 47(5), 811-827. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2007.47.5.811>
- Jozuka, E., & Wakatsuki, Y. (2020, October 22). *Japan has so few women politicians that when even one is gaffe-prone, it's damaging*. CNN.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/21/asia/japan-women-politics-hnk-dst-intl/index.html>
- Kemner, L. (2023, January 27). *Why do so many shonen anime still have that one perverted character?*. CBR. <https://www.cbr.com/why-shonen-anime-have-pervert-character>
- Kong, S. (2022, September 1). *On Manga, Anime and Sexism*. Read, Debate: Engage. Retrieved November 8, 2023, from <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/on-manga-anime-and-sexism/>
- McCurry, J. (2021, October 27). *"it is bullying, pure and simple": Being a woman in Japanese politics*. The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/27/being-a-woman-in-japanese-politics>
- Miura, M. (2021). Flowers for sexual assault victims: Collective empowerment through empathy in Japan's #MeToo movement. *Politics & Gender*, 17(4), 521-527.
 doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000258>
- Paxton, S. (2022, November 3). *Anime's Hypersexualization of Japanese Women is Coming to America: From a Japanese Woman's Perspective*. The New University. Retrieved November 8, 2023, from <https://newuniversity.org/2022/11/03/animes-hypersexualization-of-japanese-women-is-coming-to-america-from-a-japanese-womans-perspective/>
- Pollack, A. (1996, May 7). *It's see no evil, have no harassment in Japan*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/07/business/it-s-see-no-evil-have-no-harassment-in-japan.html>
- Soshi, & Tokuda, Y. (2018). Sexual harassment: The most challenging issue of medical professionalism in Japan. *Journal of General and Family Medicine*, 19(4), 118–120.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jgf2.186>
- Srivastava, T. (2023, January 1). *Jujutsu Kaisen sets a benchmark for strong shonen female characters*. CBR.
<https://www.cbr.com/jujutsu-kaisen-sets-standard-strong-shonen-female-characters/>
- [The Kavernacle]. (2022, July 20). *Japan's Sexualisation of Women in Anime and Games and The INSANE Loli Problem (MGSV and Quiet)* [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLY5SGWEVY4&ab_channel=TheKavernacle

- [The Pedanting Romantic]. (2018, October 23). *Anime Has A Sexual Harassment Problem* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0G1jvz0khQ>
- Ward, L Monique. (2002). Does Television Exposure Affect Emerging Adults' Attitudes and Assumptions About Sexual Relationships? Correlational and Experimental Confirmation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 31 (1): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014068031532>
- Xilun Pang, & Tomlinson, M. K. (2022). The trivialization of sexual harassment in Japanese mascot culture: Japanese audience responses to YouTube videos of Kumamon. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2126872>