Gender Construction Through Interactions Between the Media and Audience in Japan

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Abstract: This paper traces feminist studies in Japan on mass media texts and the audience's readings since the 1970s in the historical and social context, and reviews them from a perspective of gender identity construction. The four studies referred to examine differences in text readings by audience, and some also explore the audience's livelihood as a background. Methodologically, the studies qualitatively analyse populations consisting of people who have been identified as representative or typical of each audience, based on quantitative surveys. The readings made by audiences are defined by characteristics of Japanese society, historical background including media environment, and living situations. In the 1970s, home-oriented adult women found common values in television dramas and identified their way of living as “woman”. The studies conducted after the 1980s, on hero shows for children and on girl-oriented novels, suggest that media experience, with some momentum towards promoting changes of gender roles, still function dominantly in reproducing the existing gender system through construction of gender-specific identities. In the current era, new studies and activities of media literacy have emerged in order to raise audiences’ critical awareness of text readings.

Keywords: gender construction, media text, audience

Introduction

Feminist studies on media in Japan emerged in the 1970s. In the fall of 1974, Miiko Kodama and Yasuko Muramatsu, in separate studies, analyzed how women were represented in television news and drama shows. Both of them also gathered data in 1984 and 1994 and made comparisons of chronological changes.

Analyzing a television news show shown at 7.00 pm by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) in 1974, Kodama found that newscasters were predominantly male and that news items featuring women consisted of approximately 10% of the total. Women tended to be passive players rather than playing active roles as decision makers or primary parties. After seeing some improvements in 1984, Kodama (1989: 128–142) concluded that in 1994, the upward trend had weakened (Kodama et al., 1996: 63).

In 1974, Muramatsu (1975, 1979) carried out a quantitative and qualitative assessment of women’s roles in television drama shows and found stereotyped portrayals of women. Drama shows in 1984 and 1994 introduced newer values for women, while mixing them with old traditional standards (Makita & Muramatsu, 1985; Muramatsu, 1999).
In the 1980s and 1990s, Inoue and Josei Zasshi Kenkyu-kai (1989) analyzed women’s magazines, and Tanaka and Morohashi (1996) analyzed newspapers, finding gender biases in the contents, themes, and expressions. In the 1990s, there was a wave of publishing activity of similar studies. Most of these studies basically depended on critical perspectives of journalism or transmission models of communication in their analysis of content, with concern about the influence of media on their audience.

In 1991, Liesbet van Zoonen argued that liberal feminist media studies incorporated mainly transmission models of communication, assumed a primal influence of media on their audience, and shared a call for more realistic images of women. Consequently, van Zoonen explored new possibilities in cultural feminist media studies based on Stuart Hall’s encoding–decoding model (van Zoonen, 1991). Ang and Hermes (1991) argued the construction of gender identities through media consumption based on post-structuralist feminist theories of gender.

Some researchers have criticized methods used in Japanese studies from the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that they were based on the transmission model and the concept of gender as a dichotomous category (Matsuda, 1996; Tanaka, 1999). These studies have also been criticized as assuming women’s roles as passive receivers of powerful media. Some of these arguments make good points as it is true that Japanese women did occasionally actively confront male-dominated media or resisted media text in their readings, and were not always passive and weak victims of patriarchy.

However, besides the transmission model of liberal feminism and realism-oriented theory, there were other perspectives of advanced studies in Japan. The present article first takes one of the author’s studies carried out in the 1970s as an example, in order to show that an analysis of the significance of media content in audiences’ everyday lives was carried out, without depending on the transmission model. The study is reviewed after considering the development of gender theories.

Second, the present article examines several empirical studies that also attempted to explore relations between media text and audience in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, the present paper discusses theoretical issues and methodologies in these studies, and the significance of media literacy that attempts to not only analyze relations objectively, but also to be actively involved in changing them.

Television drama shows and the female audience in the 1970s

Dominant messages of television drama shows

In 1974, the author made an assessment of thirty-four drama shows broadcast at night in Japan, including soap operas and family dramas. The study analyzed elements such as characters’ occupations, situations, personalities, themes, and how characters were described (favorably or unfavorably). In family dramas, mostly within their setting of happy families, women tended to be described as reliable and happy mothers at home. In dramas dealing with the outside world, younger female characters facing some kind of difficulties, either resisted them or exercised patience. There was a clear message that women could be happy as long as they stayed home, and that they faced difficulties once they went outside the home into society (Muramatsu, 1975, 1979).

However, the ratio of women with jobs in the shows was relatively high at 63%. In family shows, many female characters were engaged in family businesses, including stores and small restaurants, or had pink-collar jobs such as beautician or nurse. In other dramas, women were employed as secretaries or
store employees. Women in the shows were mostly young, while men’s ages ranged widely. There were also biases in the personalities of men and women.

Because of the ratio of women with jobs in the shows was higher than in reality, it could be seen as counterproductive to argue using liberal feminism ideology that the shows should reflect reality more faithfully. Instead, I argued that television shows could improve by presenting wider ranges and a variety of types of women.

The 1974 study was conducted because most of studies on the television audience of those days did not deal with the content of shows. The study was a preliminary step to explore what the content meant to women who enjoy watching television dramas.

In 1977, the year that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of television broadcasting in Japan, Muramatsu (1978) conducted a comprehensive study on drama contents and female audiences’ reading of texts.

Living environments of women in 1977
Japan embraced the high economic growth period of the 1960s. During this period, many of the current social orders were formed, including the industrial structure (less of the population involved in agriculture and growth of labor in manufacturing and service sectors) and the business management structure (life employment and seniority system, which were adopted for mainly for men). These orders survived into the 1990s and even the twenty-first century, but later revealed structural problems. A system of gender role division of men at paid work and women at home was formed during this period, in order to support these social orders.

In the 1970s, 70% of Japanese lived in cities with populations of more than 100,000. In 1975, International Women’s Year, the ratio of women in the labor force aged 15 and over was at a record low (45.8%), following the agricultural population decline and the increase in the rate of enrollment of women in high school. In those days, employed men were required to work long hours, and the main viewers of television shows televised around 8:00 or 9:00 PM were women.

Research method
Questionnaires were sent to female residents in Tokyo whose ages ranged from 15 to 69 years, asking about their television viewing and attitudes to life in general. Out of 2000 women sampled randomly, 1050 women responded. Among the respondents, 37.9% were married with jobs (either full-time, engaged in a family business, or part-time), 36.2% were married with no job, 14.5% were single with jobs, and 9.0% were single with no job. They were asked to pick shows that they had watched more than twice out of 70 shows broadcast by six television stations. Out of these respondents, 21 married and single women were interviewed, selected from those who watched more than five contemporary drama shows weekly, considering their age, marital status, and employment.

Results of the quantitative survey
The survey showed relationships between the women’s awareness of their living and their viewing behaviors. The number of television drama shows the women watched was different according to their attitudes to women’s employment. The followings are the five choices they were given and the ratio of their answers.

1. Women should not work (7.2%).
2. Women should work until they get married (18.8%).
3. Women should work until they have children (11.6%).
4. Women should not work when children are young and should start working after they grow up (33.6%).
5. Women should keep working if possible even after having children (26.9%).

Among women who made one of the three most likely answers (2, 4 or 5), those
who selected (2) watched more shows. Answers to other questions also showed that the more family-oriented women watched a greater number of shows.

Married women were then asked about their ideal job situations and their reality. Figure 1 shows the relationships between their answers and their viewing behaviors. Women who were not satisfied with their situations, but had given up trying to improve them, watched more shows. Women who were not satisfied and were preparing to change watched the least number of shows. It seemed reasonable to argue that women in career preparation watched fewer shows because they had less time.

However, this does not explain all of the results. Factors besides external constraints, such as time, probably also had an effect on the relationship between the women’s awareness and their viewing. Therefore, the study explored what type of women viewed television shows in what everyday situation, and what they read into them.

**Example 1: Married woman, a 32-year-old homemaker**

**Life history**

After graduating from a local high school, this woman became a licensed nurse, but she did not like her job very much. After moving to Tokyo, she attended a design school while making a living as a nurse. She graduated when she was 25 years old. She got married after being pushed by her parents. Her 36-year-old husband was an employed engineer. The couple had two boys, a four-year-old and a two-year-old.

**Lifestyle and attitude**

This woman had been pushed to get married by her parents, despite her wish to do more things. She said, “At that time I thought deeply it was sad to be a woman. If I had a girl, I would want her to have a family someday, but I would never tell her to hurry to get married.” She considered giving birth to be a women’s privilege and she was happy in that sense. However, she also said, “It feels like I am riding on waves. I feel that I am having an easy life, and I should think harder about my life.” On the other hand, she said having a job would be difficult because her husband had beliefs that women should stay home. She hoped to learn something once her children grew older. As for her own personality, she said, “If I decided on something, I would pursue it stubbornly”, but her ideal type of woman was modest and ladylike.

**Television activity**

This woman’s husband watched baseball until 9:00 pm, and she watched drama shows after that. Her husband would also watch them, but with indifference. She mostly watched family dramas and contemporary shows. She liked a morning serial drama

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<tr>
<th>Number of contemporary drama shows they watched per week</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>It is not ideal but I have given up (29.4%)</td>
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<td>It is ideal and I am satisfied with the current status (37.1%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is not ideal but I have not done any preparation (14.1%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is not ideal and I am in preparation to change it (10.6%)</td>
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Figure 1. Ideal job situations and reality of married women
because it covered, “the heroine’s life from when she was young to when she grew old, and I can follow how a woman went through her life.” She also showed interest in how women grow up in nighttime shows.

She liked the ending of a show Onna no Kao (Face of a Woman) when the heroine went to the USA not caring if she didn’t receive her grandfather’s inheritance. “This is something that I could not do. I tend to envy when people do what I could not do,” she said. Regarding the show Tempoku Genya with two heroines, she said, “I like Kino better who put up with a lot of things. I tend to like somebody who is different from myself.”

On the other hand, of the popular show, Kishibe no Album, which portrayed a collapsing nuclear family with a corporate worker as a husband and a cheating wife, she said, “I am not interested in cheating. I think women always lose when cheating,” and “I like the actress who played the wife and I always wanted to watch it, but I seldom watched it.”

Analysis
This woman was at least satisfied with the reality of her life. However, the feeling she felt at the time of her marriage: “It is sad to be a woman,” and the sense that she was not doing what she wanted to do seemed to linger thereafter. Therefore, she was interested in how women live and grow up. Perhaps unconsciously she was comparing the character’s life with her own and trying to justify her own lifestyle. By favoring an opposite type of reserved women in television shows, perhaps she was trying to persuade herself that restraint should be the way for women, rather than “doing what I wanted to do.”

Example 2: Married woman, a 36-year-old homemaker

Life history
After graduating from high school, this woman worked for a company and helped her family’s business. At the age of 26, she thought, “I have to get married before I get old,” and got married through an arrangement. Her husband and his father were running a watch store in central Tokyo. Since their marriage, this woman had been living in the store with her in-laws. The couple had two elementary school-age children. Right after the marriage, the woman helped with the business and her mother-in-law was in charge of housework. Later, she started to do most of the housework, while helping with the business once in a while.

Lifestyle and attitude
The hardest burden for this woman was “making the compromise of living with my in-laws.” She felt most relaxed when she went back to her own family. She said, “I sometimes want to have my own time, but I am always worried about what my mother-in-law will think.”

Television activity
This woman only watched television from 9:00 to 10:00 pm onwards, after the store closed. She watched television, “sitting down and not doing anything else.” There was only one television set in the household, and she did not get to select a channel under normal circumstances. However, she said: “Lately my mother-in-law goes to sleep around 10:00 pm, so I can have it all after that.”

This woman considered herself to be a big fan of drama and watched one show with a female heroine every day. She did not watch family dramas. She always watched Hanabouro, which portrays a woman who was a computer programmer until she inherited a Japanese inn upon the death of her mother. About the show she said, “I don’t think the story is extraordinary, but there are some small things that I can learn from lines. There are things that we all can learn from what another character does to help the main character. I gain knowledge of how to treat customers. I admire another character, the office worker. She has more experience
and knows her job better than the heroine, and I can learn from her. I sympathize with her and I feel we should grow like that, too.”

In general, she was interested in characters who were the same age or older. She said of another show with an older character, “It makes me think of my future. I wonder if I will think like the character when I get older.”

She did not watch Kishibe no Album willingly, not just because her husband said it was crappy, but also because she did not like it. She said, “It is not like I am uninterested in an employee’s family. I just don’t like it that much.” Regarding the homemaker character, she said unsympathetically, “If you stay home bored every day, that could lead to cheating. I guess she went outside the home to find excitement after all the days.” As for melodramas, she said, “I used to watch them when I was young. I started to watch them less once I got married and had children.”

Analysis
This woman was busy constantly with the family business and with housework for three generations (six family members). She was not positively satisfied with her life, but she did not desire to do other things. She acknowledged the reality and her mental status was quite stable. However, living with her in-laws involuntarily made her feel tied down. She did not have her own world to release herself into, and she depended on her family home and television shows to take a rest.

Television drama shows were not only recreation for her, but also a prime information source because she did not have contact with other media, nor did she go out. She only showed interest in the shows that she could identify with, and tried to relate to characters and absorb information that can be useful in her life. She also justified her lifestyle and comforted herself by feeling sympathetic towards and defending characters with similar burdens.

Married women’s lives and television shows
In this study into television shows and the lives of married women, 13 married women were interviewed who were big television drama fans. The analysis of these cases led to categorization of them into several types. What identified these types were: (i) if the women were satisfied with their lives, or had given up, while retaining their anxiety and complaints; and (ii) if the women sought from the shows similar characters or situations to their own, or something further from their lives. When a general female audience was categorized based on (i), there were other types of women who had complaints and were trying to change or had already had done something towards changing. These women were not interviewed because they did not show great interest in drama shows. Perhaps women who were willing to make changes had something other than television to look forward to. However, all interview respondents agreed that television shows could be a tool for recreation. Women who were satisfied or had given up sought in drama shows something as a substitute for what the other types of women looked for outside television, and read the shows for that purpose.

Women who were satisfied tended to have the ability to see themselves and others objectively. They usually judged characters in the shows objectively or appreciatively. Women with busy lives (such as example 2) tended to concentrate on their demanding lives. They tried to absorb useful fragments of information for their everyday life from the shows, but they did not relate the shows to their ways of living.

Women who had complaints and anxiety about their lives, while trying to put up with them, tended to read into shows what was either similar to their own lives or completely opposite. Those who read something similar were the ones who comforted themselves by finding likeness in shows, thus feeling that they were not alone. They also found characters who were more unhappy
than they were, and tried to convince themselves to be satisfied with their lives. However, those who favored characters in different kinds of situations to their own, used television shows as opportunities to release their complaints and anxiety by absorbing themselves in fantasy.

There were relationships between the types of readings by women and genres of shows they favored. Women who were happy with their lot or who found the shows similar to their own lives favored family dramas that lacked major struggles. Those who preferred an opportunity to release their frustration tended not to watch these family shows. More dramatic non-family shows were watched by women who sought different shows to their own lives and by women who sought similar shows to their own lives.

_Sasurai no Tabiji_ was a non-family drama show that can be used here as an example of different readings. This show portrayed a woman who got married into a disproportionately good family and was kicked out later, leaving her child behind. Its story line was quite dramatic, with the heroine ending up an alcoholic and even committing a murder. One woman (a homemaker) said, “I can watch it easily because it is so different from my life, which is peaceful and calm. If I were in a similar situation, I would not watch it,” and “The heroine who puts up with difficulties is modest and feminine. She has something that I do not have, and I think that she is the way women should be.” This woman thought that women should work when married, although she had not had the room to think that way when her own children were small. She was somewhat unhappy with not having a job, but her husband and father-in-law were against her working, and she was unwilling to take action against their wishes. She sought stimulus in television shows, satisfied her desires and calmed her annoyances, while feeling assured that the content was so far from her own real life that it did not affect her.

Another woman (also a homemaker) who felt vaguely impatient, but accepted her life, said about _Sasurai no Tabiji_, “The heroine seemed to be an ordinary woman. She maintained her pride and kept the memories of her child even in her destroyed life. I like her way of living.” She seemed to read the dramatic content as a reaffirmation of a mother’s role and as reinforcing her own beliefs. By doing so, this woman alleviated her vague anxiety and stabilized herself.

Watching drama shows for these married women, who were either satisfied or had accepted their unsatisfactory reality, was a tool used to reaffirm their satisfaction or to justify their patience by acknowledging that it was not possible to change. Therefore, watching these shows meant more than just recreation to these women.

**Review of the study**

It is possible to take another look at this study, based on recently developed gender theories. When asked what was interesting about their favorite television shows, the interviewees almost always mentioned female characters. The only exception was a high school student who said that she watched shows portraying a group of young people in order to see young male characters. She liked depictions of the process of men and women coming together and eventually getting married. She was attracted to male characters, but did not identify with the characters.

Therefore, it can be said that the television drama fans interviewed in this survey watched shows within the gender frame of “female”. Although these women came from various backgrounds and living situations, and there were different types of female characters in the television shows they watched, they focused primarily on the characters because they were “women”. In so doing, they consciously or unconsciously made judgments about themselves and their lives based on the characters. This was probably the main reason that they favored television drama shows. Watching shows for these women was a process of affirmation of their identity as “women”.

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The way the women interviewed used shows as standards of judgment depended on their own livelihood and living situation. Although all of the interviewees were middle-class women living in Tokyo, they were not affected equally as mere passive viewers would have been. Objective observations led to the conclusion that television drama shows had a function in maintaining their lifestyles by leading them to accept what they had, comforting them, or making them give up desires for change, regardless of individual differences.

The dominant message of television dramas as a whole at the time was “Home is the woman’s castle”. However, the female audience did not passively accept this message. Women seemed to use highly-rated family dramas that depicted happy families as opportunities for spending time with their own family while accepting these values. However, most of interviewees watched either more non-family dramas along with family dramas, or non-family drama shows only, and they tended to watch non-family drama shows alone and with a bigger commitment. Perhaps these women accepted the views described in family shows and shared them with their own families, at the same time as watching non-family dramas to construct their identity on deeper levels. However, these women read the shows in ways that suggested that they focused on the processes of stories in non-family shows, rather than the outcomes, in order to find resources they could use to judge and adopt in their own lives. In the end, the shows reinforced values that justified their existence within the home.

Young audiences in the 1980s and 1990s

Mass Media in the 1980s to 1990s
Television drama shows in the 1970s enjoyed high ratings, with some home drama shows reaching 30% of the total television audience. However, since the 1980s women have outgrown television shows, leaving ratings as low as 20% at the highest. The main viewers of television drama shifted from married women to younger women in their 20s and 30s. Families came to own more than one television set, rather than sharing one television set to watch a show together, and productions became focused on more specific types of viewers. A combination of these changes and more severe competition meant that family drama shows faded.

Female audiences also went through their own changes. According to research data on television viewing behaviors in the 1970s, although women tended to spend more time watching television than men, this was because women spent more time at home, not because women favored television more than men did (Muramatsu, 1983). Women who had been seeking standards of judgment from drama shows, when their primary resource for information and entertainment was television, came to realize that television was not a solution, and started to seek practical activities and alternative resources for information.

In the late 1980s, the main target of television dramas was young women. Young women of the period became more high-spirited, driven by a new way of living under the influence of feminism, and at the same time were cultivated as an emerging target of business industries in a consumer-oriented society. Other media, such as magazines, also cultivated younger women, teens, and children as new markets.

Media behavior and gender construction in childhood
This section examines a study on how young people read gender representation in the mainstream media and construct gender identities (Inoue, 1990). College students were asked to write about their mass media experiences in order to examine the impact of gender representations in mass media on children’s formation of self.
Research methods
College students were asked to write about their media experience since childhood by listing media (such as television shows, books, and magazines) that they remembered, and by composing an essay on the following “My history of self-formation through media experience”. Inoue (1990) analyzed the media experiences of 146 women and men who were born between 1967 and 1970 (their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years in 1988 when the survey was carried out).

Children’s media experience
The respondents grew up with television and many kinds of magazines and picture books. As more media for children became available over time, children were exposed to them at earlier stages. Mass media for children contained many stereotyped gender images. Popular characters and stories in television shows for children spread into other media, and marketing strategies tied them in with toys and foods. Through these marketing channels, young children were exposed to gender-specialized goods. Children had gendered experiences in role-playing games from popular television shows.

Gender gaps in media experiences
There was a gender gap in the media experience of the respondents, at least as far as they remembered. Female students tended to list a greater number of media such as TV shows, magazines, and books. The average number of television shows that women saw from their childhood to high school was 38.4, while men only remembered 16.4 shows on average. A similar tendency was also seen in regard to magazines and books.

Inoue (1990) argued that one of the reasons for this phenomenon was gender asymmetry in media exposure based on the fact that male students cited only male-oriented media, while female students named both male- and female-oriented media. She argued that boys tended to be held back from female-oriented media and felt uncomfortable relating themselves to female models in a society based on men as the basic form of human being, while girls could identify themselves with male models in the media.

Viewing of hero shows
More than 70% of the respondents, regardless of their gender, in their infancy or elementary school days watched “hero shows” where the main character was a robot or an android. According to the Forum for Children’s Television (1981: 115–134), most of the characters in hero shows were male. Heroes often shared values where they were members of elite troops with great fighting ability. They were usually young, good-looking, and smart. “In this kind of television show, there is a pattern where women and children are victims of evil. Women and children are usually presented as merely weak and helpless characters with no weapons, ability or wisdom. They do not attempt to make efforts to survive crisis situations. They just wait for a hero to emerge and rescue them” (Forum for Children’s Television, 1981: 130).

In analyzing the experience of viewers of hero shows, Inoue (1990) found that most men had received ideas about good and evil quite straightforwardly. Male respondents told of experiences where they identified themselves with heroes protecting justice. Some of them had enjoyed taking the part of the hero themselves on a daily basis. Others who could not take hero roles identified themselves with minor characters and drew moral lessons from the characters. Inoue did not find any male respondent who had questioned values or gender roles described in the shows (Inoue, 1990).

Female respondents, on the other hand, showed a variety of reactions. While some agreed with the gender roles depicted in hero shows, others expressed their disagreement. Ones who agreed explained by saying, “I liked a female character who was rescued by the hero,” and “I had a passion for the hero. I was attracted to the hero’s strength,
and thought I was going to get married to somebody like him.” One of the respondents who disagreed with the gender roles of the hero shows wrote that she found it painful to be forced to take the part of a female character who was caught by the enemy and tied up. Another straightforwardly expressed feelings that she was frustrated to be given a minor role and said that she often ended up fighting. Some had even wished to be male and play hero roles.

Observations from the survey
The media environment that children face nowadays is still fundamentally similar to what Inoue’s respondents experienced. The gender division within media content remains strong, and stereotyped expressions in the media are still common, with only superficial changes allowed.

Girls more than boys tend to read a wider range of information about gender in the media. On an individual basis, boys lean towards male-oriented media only, but girls have contacts with both female- and male-oriented media. Inoue (1990) observed that this was also true when it came to magazines, comic books, and books. By exposing themselves to a variety of media, girls observe that there are different gender messages, and receive stereotyped messages about the role of women embedded in male-oriented media. Boys tend to read dominant messages from male-oriented media, without the kind of comparisons that girls experience. Boys generally identify themselves with heroes and do not question dominant messages, while girls show various reactions, including reading the displayed gender directly, feeling uncomfortable, or relating themselves to heroes, thereby ignoring gender.

Girls show a variety of reactions depending on individual factors in their individual environments. However, girls also share knowledge about some television programs with friends and participate in role-playing games. It is a contemporary phenomenon that children may have a hard time forming relationships with others without commonly shared television shows. This can mean that girls receive the message that society expects them to play certain roles, regardless of whether or not they agree with it. Girls who disagree with a message become aware of a conflict between their own viewpoints and the dominant values of society, while girls who agree with a message may not be aware of any conflict. Whether girls who feel resistant eventually accept the repeated message as a part of reality or not would depend factors in their individual environment, and the variety in the information they are exposed to.

Self-formation in girlhood and the media
Inoue et al. (1994) studied the formation of self around gender identity in young girls, using quantitative and qualitative analysis of the impact of the media. In 1992, questionnaires were sent to 1001 high school freshmen, both boys and girls. Following this, 40 of the female respondents were interviewed during 1993.

Results of the quantitative survey
The survey recorded swings in the gender identities of female high school students when they were asked if they had ever hoped to be reborn as a man, and when they had that desire. The survey also asked them about jobs they would like to have and images of themselves at 30 years of age, in order to examine future prospects from a gender perspective.

In order to analyze the relationship between magazines and the formation of gender identity, respondents were categorized into three groups: (i) girls who did not read magazines (24.9% of the total); (ii) girls who read girls’ magazines (39.3%); and (iii) girls who read non-girl-oriented magazines (35.9%). The study group found that readers of girls’ magazines had values close to a conventional definition of femininity, tended to hope for women-oriented occupations, and often mentioned marriage and parenting in their future prospects.
From these results, it is unclear whether they had reinforced their feminine tendencies because they read more girls’ magazines, or if they read the magazines because of their feminine tendencies. However, as the authors argued, it is probable that girls’ magazines and conventional ideas about gender roles tend to reinforce each other.

Fluctuation in gender identity and the media experience
Inoue et al. (1994) examined the fluctuation in gender identity of female respondents by exploring their confidence about their femininity. They asked the respondents if they desired to be reborn as a man and if they desired to live like their mother, and evaluated the gendered attitudes of the girls. The respondents were then categorized into 27 groups based on their answers, and the three largest groups were chosen for case studies. The three groups were as follows:

1. Girls who did not desire and had never desired to be reborn as a man (with strong gendered attitudes).
2. Girls who had desired to be reborn as a man in the past, but did not presently (with strong gendered attitudes).
3. Girls who had always had a desire to be reborn as a man (without strong gendered attitudes).

Ms A, a respondent from group 1, had never desired to be reborn as a man, but had always felt incomplete and had negative feelings about her life and surroundings. She regularly read Cobalt Collection, a light reading series for young girls, books of which are mainly novels with a common story line of an ordinary girl growing up through a romance with a boy and acquiring love, courage and confidence. Inoue et al. (1994) suggested that these novels helped Ms A, as she quietly went through her girlhood without dreams and ambitions, to escape from reality and fill her feelings of incompleteness.

Ms B, a respondent from group 2, had desired to be a man when she was the fourth grade, but the desire had disappeared after the seventh grade. She did not have any self-understanding about why she had the desire, but Inoue et al. (1994) suggested that she had wanted to escape temporarily from the negative reality caused by the fact that she was a girl. She said that the reason the desire had disappeared was that her friends liked her as she was. Inoue et al. (1994) concluded that the media also supported this change because Ms B had switched from girls’ comic magazines to entertainment magazines filled with male and female celebrities, and fashion magazines for women. They argued that she had come to accept and reinforce the idea that she was a woman by absorbing female-oriented information.

Ms C, a respondent from group 3, criticized her mother for quitting her job after getting married. She expressed an interest in being a scientist, a researcher, and a lawyer. Ms C had read scientific magazines, since she had become an elementary school student. She had never been interested in female-oriented magazines or television shows.

Conclusions from the study
We can conclude that, in the 1990s, girl-oriented media often affected female high school students by reinforcing and justifying conventional ideas about being women. Ms A, who had never questioned her femininity, liked to read women-oriented novels. Ms B, who had lost her desire to be a man, also liked female-oriented magazines. However, Ms C, who maintained a desire to be reborn as a man, had never been a reader of female media.

Of course there are women’s magazines and television shows that have information that is different from conventional ideas about women. However, mainstream media for young women generally tend to praise conventional femininity and to present values that are pro-marriage and pro-
heterosexuality, although they may introduce new values in a superficial manner. Young female audiences often read the media message as a reinforcement of gender identity that matches conventional roles for women, rather than resisting this information.

**Girls-oriented novels and socialization of femininity**

As Inoue *et al.* argued in their 1994 study, girl-oriented novels can play a significant role for young women. Kimura (1999: 153–203) analyzed the contents of girl-oriented novels and explored how young girls read them.

**Reading behavior of students towards girl-oriented novels**

In 1993, a survey was conducted of 2000 students from the fifth grade to high school sophomores (Kimura, 1999). To the question, “Do you read teen-oriented novels that feature romances and dating?” only few male students said they did, but among the female students, more than 50% of grade-schoolers, more than 70% of junior high-school students, and 55% of high-school sophomores said they often or sometimes read them. Among junior high-school and high-school students, interactions concerning these novels were quite active, with approximately 70% having novels recommended to them by friends, 50% who had recommended novels to their friends, and 30% who had discussed novels with friends.

Asked to pick their favorite kind of media out of 10 options, male junior high-school students’ favorites were adventure stories (65.3%) and stories involving hard action (53.7%), while female junior high-school students selected romantic love stories (64.2%) and moving or sad stories (49.4%). Among readers of girl-oriented novels, 87.2% of girls who often read them and 64.6% of girls who sometimes read them chose romantic love stories as their favorite. Among girls who did not read girl-oriented novels, only 39.8% selected romantic love stories and they mostly selected adventure stories as their favorite (48.1%).

Female junior high-school students who often read girl-oriented novels admitted to liking somebody of the opposite sex, to dreaming of getting married to an ideal person, and to being unsatisfied with their face or body more often than the young girls who sometimes read these novels. Among girls who did not read these novels, very few admitted these tendencies.

Kimura (1999) suggested that there was a deep relationship between reading girl-oriented novels and interests in romance and marriage. She also argued that a girl’s interest in romance increases proportionately to their interest in attractive body features.

**Contents of girl-oriented novels and girls’ reading**

Kimura (1999) proposed basic structures of girl-oriented novels, which were popular from the mid 1980s to the 1990s, by referring to arguments formulated by Christian-Smith (1990). Girl-oriented novels begin from “dearth” where the main character has a troubling situation or anxiety, then “encounters” or “approaches” a male character, and ends in “completion of love”.

Another characteristic of Japanese girl-oriented novels is that the main character grows mentally in the process. The novels often emphasize that in this growing period the main character acquires an ability to sympathize with and care about others. In this sense, most girl-oriented novels have a message that leads readers in the direction of femininity.

At the same time, Kimura argued, the images of heroines in the popular novels changed from the 1980s to the 1990s. Feminist types with strong, individual, independent selves were popular in the 1980s, followed by heroines engaging in romantic infatuations in the end of the 1980s. In the 1990s, heroines showed their solid identities in more subtle and natural ways (Kimura, 1999).
Kimura had female college students write an essay about their experiences of reading girl-oriented novels. According to her assessment, most of the students had experienced a period of time when they had a passion for the novels, identified themselves with the characters, or felt liberated because of the distance between reality and the fantasies in the novels. However, some respondents criticized some of the novels harshly and pointed out sparseness in their content. Regarding novels that featured a strong independent woman, some respondents expressed their thoughts as, for example, “I liked it because she was not too feminine,” and, “It felt refreshing.” They said of novels that included characters who demonstrated their identity in a natural way, “It was a learning experience,” and, “I learned that I have to look at myself as well as romance,” while sharing the characters’ experience of conflicts. It seems that readers of girl-oriented novels compared the gender ideology presented by the novels with their own circumstances, and selected some to use and abandoned others.

**Conclusion**

Analyses of Japanese mass media from a gender perspective has for the most part criticized the media for presenting conventional gender ideology. Kimura (1999) also argued that it was possible that the values of growth and achievement that readers of girl-oriented novels acquired by reading them could be absorbed into conventional women’s values. However, her study is unprecedented in that it suggests that it is possible for women to create a variety of forms of femininity in their reading of such novels.

**Media and gender construction**

The common characteristics of the studies reviewed here so far are that they were designed, using quantitative surveys, to identify the positions of the subjects in society, continuing with qualitative interviews and case studies. Using qualitative methods, the studies analyzed the relationship between media texts and individuals, considering their livelihoods and backgrounds on concrete levels. It was understood from the start that these relationships could not be explained thoroughly using the media transmission model or through exploring correlations and connections in a quantitative manner only. However, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the studies reviewed here avoided arbitrary selection of the subjects.

The contemporary media–audience relationship is impossible to understand without some historical background and a social/cultural context of media and everyday life. The cultural or social context that must be considered in Japanese society are that Japan has little racial/ethnic diversity, that gaps between classes are relatively small, and that Japanese people have a high tendency to conform to others in inner groups.

Ehara argues that social construction of gender occurs on two levels: (i) through widespread discourses that are available for many people; and (ii) through discourses performed among individual social interactions (Ehara, 2001: 29–58). It is also important that audiences can not only use media texts as widespread discourses to relate to themselves, but also recognize that the discourses are shared with many others. Certain genres of media texts, such as family drama shows and female-oriented novels, produce audiences that do share discourses. Individual viewers or readers utilize what they read from media texts as their criteria of judgment, assuming that the audience of the genre does accept its discourses, although there are differences in readings.

In a rather homogeneous society such as Japan, persons tend to identify common ground between characters in media texts and themselves. The tendency to conform to
others also pushes people to use media texts as the criteria of judgment for themselves.

Diversification of mass media, especially since the 1980s, has led to segmentation of audiences, producing greater numbers of smaller or limited groups that people identify with, depending on their age and interests. Although people may come to conform to smaller groups, audiences nevertheless read media texts as criteria of judgment for the groups they belong to.

In the 1970s, when I conducted the first Japanese study on television drama viewing, women’s values and livelihoods had not yet diversified. The basic ideas of gender division in roles were self-evident to many. At that time, female-oriented dramas as a whole constructed the discourse that a woman’s place is in the home, and succeeded in attracting many female viewers. Therefore, from a feminist point of view, desired changes in television dramas would be in the direction of diversity, not towards a faithful reflection of reality. Looking back using recent theories of gender, many women’s readings of media, although of course not all, were a process of gender identity construction based on dichotomous gender divisions.

In the 1980s, Japan made some legal progress in the status of women, such as the enforcement of the Equal Employment Opportunities Law. The idea that there were options for women besides the traditional way of living became accepted. With these changes, drama shows were unable to attract such high ratings and had to change their styles and targets. Women who used drama shows as a tool to identify themselves were no longer in the majority.

Since the 1990s, there have been studies that have suggested that media texts function as catalysts to stabilize gender identity as traditional and to change it at the same time.6 There have been activities initiated by women to effect change in popular culture and to increase the public voices of women through various expressions and alternative media.

From a feminist perspective, I also recognize the significance of finding momentum for change in media texts and to explore possibilities for change in mainstream media. However, the studies introduced here suggest that audiences still tend to read dominant messages of media texts, while maintaining relative independence from them and playing active roles in deciding what they read or watch, and that media–audience interactions tend to function to reinforce conventional values. It remains an important task to continue to focus on media texts and the audience to explore whether mass media fundamentally maintain the conventional gender order.

In addition, there have only been limited studies on male gender identity construction and its relationship to media. The subject remains to be studied in the future.

From the aim of feminist studies seeking changes, the audience as well as in media require progression. Studies on the meanings of media texts for the audience are shifting from merely looking at current audience readings to raising audience awareness. Inoue (1990), who analyzed college students’ self-history of media exposure, mentioned raising awareness among interviewees through their commitment to her survey as the significance of this method.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there have been studies and programs of media literacy to raise “the people’s abilities to critically analyze and evaluate media, further, to have access to the media and to express themselves, producing social communication” (http://www.mljp.org/index-e.html). The significance of media literacy is recognized widely also from gender perspectives, and there are emerging practical activities available for people to learn more critical and deeper ways of reading media. Activities to develop media literacy, and studies of dominant meanings of media texts and readings of the audience are in “the pull and push relationship between action and research” (Gallagher, 2001: 14).

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Notes

1 Inoue (1992; 1995), Kato (1996) and several articles reviewed these studies.
2 Studies by Muramatsu introduced in this article were based on research carried out by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, at which Muramatsu worked.
3 The degree of closeness to a conventional definition of femininity was measured by a scale constructed based on yes/no answers to nine items such as “good at cooking”, “nervous about own figure and appearance” and “assert myself until I understand”.
4 Ishida (2000) noted the significance of gendered genre in the media.
5 In Japan, foreign television dramas do not attract large numbers of viewers.
6 For example, see Kato (1998).

References


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