

Contesting Heteronormativity in Japanese Culture

The macro institution of media has played a significant role in the socialisation of sexual identity awareness in Japan. Despite the media in recent times being highly selective in reflecting and portraying images exemplifying homosexuality, this has overwhelmingly increased with the Manga phenomenon offering unique sub genres of sexual identity and gender for targeted audiences. The media is a powerful medium of communication which has allowed for the development of globalisation and hence Western opinions of discourse towards the queer community. Although these models may influence Japan's current situation, in essence they are demonstrating nonconformity through the open representation of homosexual public figures and celebrities regularly portrayed in the media. The purpose of this chapter is to examine and determine the influence of the Japanese media in the development of queer identities, socialising understandings of sexuality in contemporary Japan.

Due to the advent of technology, the media holds major influence over socialisation and has vastly contributed to the 'gay boom'²² of homosexual themed movies, television programs and popular magazine features that has increasingly developed in Japanese society since the late 1980s. The academic article, "Explanations for the Japanese Demographic Crisis"²³ elaborates on the circular model of causation that explains while media may often reflect what already prevails in pop culture, it often selects components to amplify. This creates a feedback loop in which the magnified elements of popular culture then become the norm that it presents. This can be evidenced in Japan through a narrow range of images focussing on a single homosexual identity. Nonetheless, this model demonstrates how powerful the media is when enculturating sexual identity.

In the context of contemporary Japan, film actors and anime characters, being the epitome of popular culture, are able to depict and promote the currently accepted standard of homosexuality, which is stereotypically portrayed as the extrovert, overly feminine and humorous figure. Media

representations are critical in moulding individual perceptions and promoting change within society. The media perpetuates the notion that fitting the identity presented through media platforms is paramount. According to my interviewee²⁴ Professor Offord states that “The media and typically manga has played a significant role in portraying explicit and very common depictions of homosexuality and relations, hence normalising the gay identity”. This reflects the responsibility that the media has in ensuring the portrayal of society holistically. Despite Offord’s authoritative stance, his opinion may prove biased due to it being from a singular perspective. However, it is evident that the media has the ability to influence public opinion through distorting and accentuating certain aspects of society, consequently endorsing a superficial ethos of homosexuality in Japan.

The media, as a macro institution has enhanced the desire to explore sexuality. Kuriko²⁵, the manager of Onna No Ko Cafe, in Nichome known as Tokyo’s ‘gay district’ confirms that it has become “niche” and “trendy to dress like a girl” and that many “straight people participate in the act of cross dressing”. Additionally, in Japan cross dressing is considered a “form of self expression that is not restricted by the concept of gender”. This gender fluidity somewhat contributes to an understanding of sexual identity in Japanese society as through the overwhelming acceptance to androgyny.