

# A Transdisciplinary Approach to Comics: —an Overview of Journal Articles on Comics in Japanese Gender Studies—

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## **Abstract**

Although many investigations in different academic fields have examined comics, little effort has been made to understand and handle the relationships between these studies. Thus, our research project was initiated to identify a solution and provide comics studies with an interdisciplinary perspective. The first step of the study was to inspect the development of comics research in academic fields such as psychology, educational research, sociology, historical research, literary studies, and gender studies. The next step was to create a database that enables users to easily find articles citing or referencing comics in any discipline within the humanities and social sciences. The ultimate objective of this project is to develop a transdisciplinary approach to comics by promoting cross-referencing using our database service.

As part of the results obtained in the first step of the study, this paper provides an overview of the existing comics research published in journals of Japanese gender studies. Considering papers analysing comics from a gender studies perspective, authors' attitudes can be divided into four types: (1) utilising comics as a lens through which gender patterns or the social status of women in current Japanese society can be discussed; (2) interpreting comics as an agent that might affect the ways in which gender patterns are constructed and modified; (3) exploring the possibilities for comics as media describing or depicting new gender patterns or gender relationships; and (4) analysing comics motivated by an interest in understanding the cultural phenomena surrounding them.

## Introduction

This study reviewed the existing research on comics from a gender perspective. Although many investigations have examined comics in Japanese gender studies, little effort has been made to understand and handle the relationships between this research. Our review provides an overview of the current state of comics studies in Japanese gender studies.

In one sense, comics studies<sup>(1)</sup> in Japan has grown into an independent field of criticism. In fact, many critics have improved methodologies for articulating the rhetoric or the structure of manga. The essential motivation underlying this criticism is a common idea shared among critics and scholars of comics, as discussed by Uryu (1998): manga needs to be analysed as an autonomous art form or media form.<sup>(2)</sup> In this light, those studies that mention or cite comics to exemplify their own ideas, or that employ comics as a material that might shape or reflect social and cultural facts, are hardly considered as 'comics studies' but instead as 'studies using comics'.<sup>(3)</sup>

However, 'studies using comics' also have a long history. Since the late 1930s, some scholars have explored comics in terms of education, for example by investigating the use of comics as learning tools (Tamada 2010). Especially after the 1990s, different academic disciplines have regarded comics as useful research materials, and the research on comics has progressed in each academic field according to the frameworks of each discipline.

In view of these different approaches to comics, Ieshima (2007) identified three problems, reviewing psychological research on comics: (a) the number of papers on comics published in psychological research journals is significantly less than the volume of non-academic accounts or lay criticism; (b) these psychological research articles are scattered across different areas of psychology; and (c) few papers discuss the importance of comics as research materials in psychology. The same issue holds true for other academic disciplines, such as gender studies and

literary studies, although sociologists have been exceptionally eloquent in discussing how comics can be useful and inspiring in sociological research (e.g. Miyahara and Ogino 2001).

As Ieshima (2007) has pointed out, 'from the viewpoint of comics studies, it is desirable to develop research on comics by ensuring mutual collaboration among academic disciplines.'<sup>(4)</sup> Likewise, Berndt and Kümmerling-Meibauer (2013) reiterated the importance of approaching 'manga in a truly scholarly way' by 'making it [manga studies] a crossroads between divergent research areas as well as between established and new fields of scholarship' (Berndt and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2013, 2). It is arguably more important to share different methodologies for research on comics, rather than standing alone to articulate the distinctive characteristics of manga expression.

In line with Ieshima's (2007) claims, a research project was initiated to identify a solution. The first step was to inspect the development of comics research in each academic field. The study focuses on psychology, educational research, sociology, historical research, literary studies, and gender studies. The results for gender studies are presented in this paper.<sup>(5)</sup> The next step was to create an online database that enables users to easily find articles from any discipline within the humanities and social sciences that cite or reference comics. At the same time, this provides comics studies with an interdisciplinary perspective.<sup>(6)</sup>

Giddens ([1999]2010) stated that no academic could work in a wholly eclectic fashion because, without traditional practices in the academic world, ideas would have no focus or direction. However, Giddens ([1999]2010) also remarked that 'it is part of academic life continually to explore the limits of such traditions, and foster active interchange between them' (Giddens [1999]2010, 45). Moreover, according to Klein (2004), transdisciplinarity also moves beyond "interdisciplinary" combinations of academic disciplines to a new understanding of the relationship of science and society' (Klein 2004, 517). Klein (2004) emphasises that a

transdisciplinary approach is inevitably based on disciplinary thinking, but it also challenges such thinking 'through the principle of articulation between different forms of knowledge' (Klein 2004, 524). Considering that comics research has been led by critics and reviewers both within and outside academia, transdisciplinary approach rather than just cutting across academic divisions would be more inspiring for comics studies. To establish comics studies as a transdisciplinary academic field, we set out by understanding comics research within each academic division as Giddens ([1999]2010) suggested.

## **Background**

We highlight Japanese gender studies in this paper because it is one of the most active academic fields dealing with comics. It is not unusual for gender studies in any place in the world to be inspired by women's media genres. This field of study was motivated by an interest in how dualistic gender structure constitutes us and our social world, and mass media is regarded as one of the most influential agencies telling us, or at least making us think, about appropriate gender performances. Therefore, popular media culture such as magazines, music, television, or the internet, is one of the major objects of gender studies research. Comics has been selected as materials for investigation more often than other media due to a wide variety of comic works catering for women.

In Japan, since before the 1930s at the latest, there have been caricatures or comics targeting girls or women. From their earliest stage, publishers issued different magazines for girls and boys following the government education policy that encouraged single-sex education. Even after World War II, separate children's magazines continued to be published for each gender. This led to the document of comics for girls, and shoujo manga became a genre featuring mostly female artists and readers. Since the late 1960s, comics for girls have adopted romance as a theme, which has been depicted from women's perspectives, and

this genre opened up a huge market.

Comics for girls was sometimes looked down on because they were considered to be only for girls and because most were silly boy-girl romantic stories. In fact, even now this is still viewed as such by some. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, some comics critics and gender researchers have adopted a different attitude.

In the 1970s, certain artists published experimental works which dealt with difficult topics such as sexual abuse, fear of sex, or same sex relationships. These topics were not always depicted from women's perspectives. In fact, although each story showed sympathy for women, many protagonists were boys. It should be noted that depicting or describing female sexuality from women's perspectives was quite unusual in the major mass media in Japan. These comics strongly affected the generations that followed. After they were published, mainstream female comics tended to adopt gender roles or female sexuality as central themes.

Also, a unique subgenre has developed in women's comics, namely 'yaoi' or boys' love (BL), which depicts male-male intimate relationships while catering for female readers, like slash fiction in western countries. A notable difference between BL and slash fiction might be the size of the market. Not only as fan-fiction but also as commercial publications, BL is quite successful. Nowadays, BL comics fill the shelves of almost all bookshops sporting large selections. In fact, the market size of BL, including commercial publications (comics and novels), coterie magazines, video games, and moving images, was reported to be around 21.6 billion yen in 2011 (Yano Research Institute 2012).

In short, Japanese gender studies has shown an interest in comics for a long time in accordance with the development of women's comics. Nonetheless, comics research in terms of gender studies is not yet fully developed, at least from a methodology perspective. While the large volume and diversity of comics have encouraged gender studies scholars to investigate them, these aspects have also

led to disconnected investigations. With a few exceptions of well-known works and artists, different scholars analyse different works and artists, which makes cross-referencing difficult. Thus, reviewing previous research can facilitate interaction between research findings.

## Data and Method

Table 1. Magazines analysed in this study<sup>(7)</sup>

	Title (English)	Publisher (English)	First publishing
	Title (Japanese)	Publisher (Japanese)	Number of issues analysed
A	<i>Women's Studies</i>	The Women's Studies Association Japan	1993
	<i>Joseigaku</i>	Nihon josei gakkai	20
B	<i>Annual Report of Women's Studies</i>	The Women's Studies Society of Japan	1980
	<i>Joseigaku nempou</i>	Nihon joseigaku kenkyukai	33
C	<i>Journal of Gender Studies Japan</i>	Japan Society for Gender Studies	1998
	<i>Nihon jenda kenkyu</i>	Nihon jenda gakkai	15
D	<i>Image &amp; Gender</i>	Image & Gender Kenkyukai	1999 (-2010)
	<i>Imeji and jenda</i>	Image & Gender kenkyukai	10
E	<i>Japanese and Gender</i>	The Society for Gender Studies in Japanese	2001
	<i>Nihongo to jenda</i>	Nihongo to jenda gakkai	12
F	<i>Journal of Sport and Gender Studies</i>	Japan Society for Sport and Gender Studies	2002
	<i>Supootsu to jenda kenkyu</i>	Nihon supootsu to jenda gakkai	11
G	<i>Japanese Journal of International Society for Gender Studies</i>	The International Society for Gender Studies	2003
	<i>Kokusai jenda gakkaiishi</i>	Kokusai jenda gakkai	10
H	<i>U.S.-Japan Women's Journal</i> <sup>(8)</sup>	U.S.-Japan Center for Information on Women	1988 (-2000)
	<i>Nichibei josei janaru</i>	Nichibei josei jouhou senta	27
I	<i>Japanese Journal of Family Sociology</i>	Japan Society of Family Sociology	1989
	<i>Kazoku shakaigaku kenkyu</i>	Kazoku shakai gakkai	38

J	<i>Journal of Queer Studies Japan</i>	The Japan Association for Queer Studies	2008
	<i>Ronsou kuwia</i>	Kuwia gakkai	5
K	<i>The Liberation of Humankind: a Sociological Review</i>	The Japanese Association of Sociology for Human Liberation	1986
	<i>Kaihou shakaigaku kenkyu</i>	Nihon kaihou shakai gakkai	26

As shown in Table 1, 11 academic journals (207 issues) were selected. Of these, eight journals are from gender or women's studies (A-H), one is from the family sociology discipline (I), one from queer studies (J), and one is related to discrimination and sociology (K). Gender studies-related journals as well as those from other fields are included in the data because, as there were not many gender studies journals before the 1990s especially, articles related to gender studies are often also published in the journals of other fields.

Relevant articles were selected through an entire-page investigation of all issues—from the first to those published before March 2013—with the exception of *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, which was discontinued after 2000, and *Image & Gender*, whose latest issue was published in 2010. All pages were visually inspected rather than processed using research database systems such as CiNii (<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/>) or J-Stage (<https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/browse/-char/ja>), as we would have omitted many articles that mentioned comic titles or authors but did not contain the precise words 'manga' or 'comics' if just searching with these systems. For example, J-Stage contains all articles of the *Japanese Journal of Family Sociology* as digitised data, and a search of the database using the Chinese characters for the word 'manga' yielded six results. However, through entire-page investigation, we found ten articles mentioning comics. Moreover, one article provided as a search result mentioned a type of café known as a 'manga kissa' (comics café), not comics themselves.

The articles were organised according to their perspectives towards comics or

gender representation in comics. Articles outside the peer-reviewed journal literature, including book reviews and reports of academic conferences, were also collected. All these texts are subsequently referred to as ‘articles’, and journal literature or research papers are referred to as ‘papers’. Journal literature and shorter reports were included in the same category, as there were no clear distinctions between the types of articles in some of the journals investigated. Moreover, in some journals, such as the *Annual Report of the Women’s Studies Society*, some critiques and reports were written in a colloquial style with a feminist intention. To avoid the unreasonable elimination of these articles from ‘academic research papers’, all relevant articles are classified as ‘papers’ except for book reviews, conference reports, and interviews in this study.

## Results and Discussion

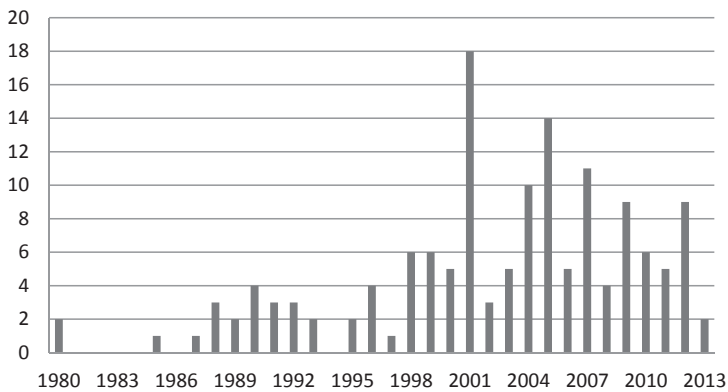


Figure1: The number of relevant articles

In total, 146 articles were accumulated. Figure 1 shows the number of articles containing at least a one-word reference to comics each year.

Since 1995, the number of articles mentioning comics has been increasing. The number peaked at 18 in 2001, although this was exceptional. In this year, a well-known feminist Kazuko Watanabe passed away and the *Annual Report of*



*Women's Studies* published that year's issue to honour her memory. She once challenged a comic series, *Maicching Machiko sensei* (Miss Machiko), as the series often depicted junior high school students touching their female teacher's breasts or lifting up her skirt for fun. Such scenes formed one of the central motifs of the series. This critique is mentioned in most of the contributed articles, as indicated in the spiking statistics for 2001.

After 2003, the number fluctuated. This is also because of feature articles, although these differ from the commemoration of 2001. After 2003, the *Annual Report of Women's Studies* featured articles related to comics in 2004 and 2005. The 2004 issue focused on how gender roles are represented in media such as novels and comics. The 2005 issue featured the third wave of feminism and articles focusing on sadomasochism, comics, and fanzines.

**Table 2: Type of articles**

Length of reference	Papers	Other	Total
word	35	47	82
part	23	6	29
whole	27	8	35
<b>Total</b>	85	61	146

**Table 3: Type of topics**

Length of reference	Body and sexuality	Culture	Family	Nationality, ethnicity, or race	Other	Total
word	3	54	8	2	15	82
part	6	15	2	5	1	29
whole	2	33	0	0	0	35
<b>Total</b>	11	102	10	7	16	146

In total, 146 articles were categorised according to the type of article (Table 2) and topic in gender studies (Table 3). In more than half these articles, the length of the reference to comics is as short as one word. These articles were rather book reviews or the reference information of academic conferences or meetings

than research papers. The four subgroups in Table 3 were provided by Ehara and Yamazaki (2006) as central themes of today’s society from a gender studies perspective (Ehara and Yamazaki 2006, ii). The results show that articles using comics as a primary research material tend to focus on culture. The results also indicate that comics suggested they might be useful for the exploration of broader topics.

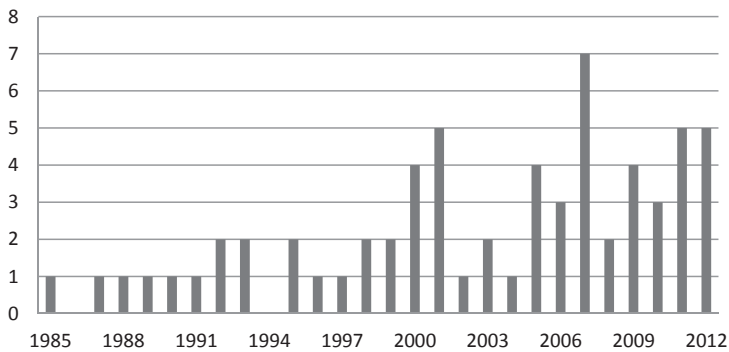


Figure 2: Number of articles mentioning comics in more than one paragraph

Table 4: Length of reference ( ) = number of papers

Length of reference	Comics in general	A certain piece of work	Total
part	12 ( 9)	17 (14)	29 (23)
whole	9 ( 7)	26 (20)	35 (27)
<b>Total</b>	21 (16)	43 (34)	64 (50)

The data shown in Figure 1 and Table 2 and 3 include all selected articles, even those in which the length of the comic reference is as short as one word. In contrast, Figure 2 and Table 4 include 64 articles which pay attention to comics in at least one paragraph. Among these 64 articles, 35 analyse comics as one of the primary research materials, while the main focal points of the other 29 articles are not comics but other media forms or social events. As for whether these articles look at particular works and creators, a total of 43 articles cite or analyse specific comic books or artists, while 21 discuss comics more broadly

(Table 4).

Even when comics in general, rather than certain books or artists, are referenced, some articles only discuss the comics of a specific genre such as BL or comics for girls. Most articles focus on both what is depicted in comic books and how fans or readers read and interpret this content.

Among these 64 articles, 50 are research papers: 16 papers mention comics in general, while 34 discuss specific works or creators. Of these 16 papers, 12 focus on comics catering to women: BL, shoujo manga (comics for girls), or women's comics (comics for adult women). Of the 34 papers citing specific works, 3 analysed one-panel cartoons, 6 discussed four-panel comic strips, and 25 examined comics in the 'story manga' format, which has long and complex storylines and is the typical style of Japanese comics.

Considering the 27 papers employing comics as the primary research material, authors' attitudes can be divided into four types<sup>(9)</sup>. All the papers share the hypothesis, proposed by Gauntlett (2008), that the media's suggested messages to audiences about gender may have some impact on how readers conduct themselves and their expectations of other people's behaviours. Nevertheless, each paper's emphasis differs, and the categories shown here help distinguish between them.

To improve readability, those papers indicated as part of the four groups but not cited are not listed in the reference; instead, they are included in the bibliography, at the end of the paper.

(1) *Utilising comics as a lens through which gender patterns or the social status of women in current Japanese society can be discussed* (Chinami 2003, 2007; Fujita 2000; Narihara 2004; Ogi 2009; Takahashi 2007; Tanigawa 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1995; Yagi 2011; Yamaguchi 1997). The papers categorised in this group do not necessarily consider comics to be a mirror reflecting society, which simply

highlights typical aspects of society. For example, Ogi (2009) compared comics for girls and television dramas of the 1970s with television dramas popular among middle-aged women in the 2000s. Ogi (2009) emphasised that these media represented the feelings and desires of girls and made them think about or imagine their subjectivity. In addition, Ogi (2009) discussed how the culture of middle-aged women, those who were girls in the 1970s, was overlooked in existing criticism. As this example implies, this standpoint might consider comics to be a clue offering a glimpse into how gender is constituted in society.

(2) *Interpreting comics as an agent that might affect the ways in which gender patterns are constructed and modified* (Josei zasshi kenkyukai comic bunseki han 1987; Matsumoto 2011). In contrast to the first category, these papers seem to hypothesise that comics play a role in shaping people's perceptions of gender and behaviour. For instance, Matsumoto (2011) analysed gendered speech in comics based on the hypothesis that the utterances presented by fictional characters affect the language development of children. According to Matsumoto (2011), the gendered speech styles of female characters in comics targeting women tend to be adopted for aggressive speech or for utterance by villains, while masculine speech is preferred as a speech style of ideal male characters in comics catering to men.

(3) *Exploring the possibilities for comics as media describing or depicting new gender patterns or gender relationships* (Ebihara 1998, 2001; Fujita 2001; Furukubo 2000; Hata 2005; Kohda 1998; Yamaguchi 2000). Outwardly, the papers in this group and those in the second group are similar. However, the papers in this category especially seem to expect that comics have the power to create alternative role models for women and consequently transform gender patterns or norms. This type of paper interprets comics as finding something different

from mainstream gender patterns. This type appears to anticipate the transformative effect of comics on readers, thus regarding comics as a political art.

(4) *Analysing comics motivated by an interest in understanding the cultural phenomena surrounding them* (Chou 2009; Kitamura 2010; Matsunami 2005; Nishihara 2010; Takahasi 2005). These papers leave open the possibility that the mass media plays a role in the process of constructing dominant gender patterns. However, instead of directly testing this assumption, they carefully investigate cultural phenomena such as the *fujoshi* (readers and writers of stories about male-male intimate relationships) community to determine how these cultures are constituted. For example, Nishihara (2010) analysed how 'yaoi' had been reported and interpreted in major newspapers and magazines, using a Foucauldian discourse analysis approach. According to Nishihara (2010), after the late 1980s, the audience for 'yaoi' has come to be described in terms of otaku, and their enthusiasm for 'yaoi' stories was explained in connection to sexual immaturity.

Only those papers using comics as the primary research material and that mention them in nearly all sections were categorised into these four groups. It would be worth mentioning that similar viewpoints are found in some of the papers that only partly cite comics. The following example mentions comics to support and exemplify the main ideas of the paper. This can be categorised into the third group previously discussed.

Enomoto (1999) examined magazine articles and comics on pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing. In terms of comics, Enomoto (1999) analysed autobiographical comics, a popular genre in Japan. The works Enomoto (1999) investigated often offer personal anecdotes about how to cope with problems related to giving birth or raising children. These comics humorously depict how

they manage to settle various problems related to childbirth and child rearing without following the medical advice of doctors and nurses. These comics occasionally make their resistance to expert knowledge more obvious by bringing up lay knowledge as a counter theory. According to Enomoto (1999), these comics generate a kind of counter-culture, not only by refusing to accept the power of authority, but also by enjoying the pleasure of resistance.

## Future Tasks

To conclude, we would like to suggest three future tasks in which comic researchers in Japanese gender studies can engage.

First, the visual rhetoric of comics should receive greater focus when conducting in-depth analysis of a certain work. Comics research in terms of gender studies tends to look at stories, because the interest is in how men and women interact rather than in the depiction of these interactions. However, because comics are a multimodal form of expression, meaning is generated through the combination of words and pictures, not through the verbal aspects of the storyline alone. Fostering interaction with research that theorises comics as a visual art, such as Carrier (2000), would provide a multidimensional perspective for comics research in gender studies.<sup>(10)</sup>

Second, other comic art forms have not yet been considered. As mentioned earlier, comics studies within gender studies has developed at least partly in response to the huge market size of women's comics. The popularity of women's comics may thus exclude other comics, such as editorial cartoons, from being employed as research materials. This task could be accomplished through reference to relevant discussions in other fields. For instance, while gender studies journals do not include much literature on political cartoons, the journals in sociology, political science, and media studies are quite active regarding the topic. Comics studies in gender studies could develop through interactions with

these fields. Moreover, these interactions would benefit comics research in other academic fields, such as sociology, in return.

Finally, many of the articles investigated were written from the perspective of discourse analysis, audience studies, or media effects research. However, most fail to clarify their research methods, which may present an obstacle to cross-referencing. It may therefore be necessary to determine the methodologies of these articles so as to link them to other studies, not only those focusing on comics but also those focusing on media such as TV dramas, films, or magazines.

All these tasks imply cross-disciplinary collaboration. Furthermore, as gender studies adopt a critical attitude to academia, this kind of collaboration might be realised by deconstructing existing methodologies. This would also promote the creation of comics studies as a transdisciplinary field of research.

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## **NOTE**

(1) Many articles are more likely to use the term ‘manga studies’ rather than ‘comics studies’ when mentioning critique or studies conducted in Japan. This practice is probably meant to distinguish manga from other comic art forms such as Manhua (Chinese comics), American comics, or bande dessinée (French or Belgian comics). On the contrary, in this study, the terms ‘comics’ and ‘comics studies’ are used rather than ‘manga’ and ‘manga studies’ because we review and organise not only studies on manga but also studies on comics in general. When specifically mentioning the Japanese comic art form, we use the term ‘manga’.

- (2) All quotations and citations originally written in Japanese were translated into English by the authors of this paper.
- (3) As Berndt and Kümmerling-Meibauer (2013) have mentioned, manga studies 'have been dominated by media-historical research as well as analyses of the specific visual language and literacy characteristic of "manga proper" (hyogenron)' (Berndt and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2013, 1).
- (4) 「マンガ学の見地からすれば、各学問領域が相互に連携をとりながらマンガに関する研究を進めていくことが望まれる」 (Ieshima 2007, 175).
- (5) A review of research in sociology was presented at the 85th Annual Meeting of the Japan Sociological Society ('The review and perspective of the study on manga in SOCIOLOGY' (1)-(4), 3 November 2012 at Sapporo Gakuin University. The presenters were Akihiko Ieshima (Shimane University), Satoru Ikegami (Rikkyo University), Mikako Hata (Hanazono University), and Mari Nishihara (Doshisha University)). A review of research in educational research was presented at the 55th Conference of the Japanese Educational Research Association ('The Development of Research on Manga and Education,' 18 August 2013 at Hosei University. The presentation related to this project was by Keisaku Tamada (Keio University)).
- (6) The project website is <http://ieshima-kaken.soc.shimane-u.ac.jp/english.html>
- (7) With some exceptions, all articles in these journals are written in Japanese.
- (8) English supplements are not included.
- (9) Kimura (2008) is not included in any of the four groups, since the focus of Kimura's paper is not on gender. Still, Kimura (2008) was published in *Image and Gender* and the main question pondered is related to a comic book series, thus, this paper is included in the data.
- (10) These types of scholarly research do already exist, for example Mori (2010).

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If a reference doesn't have an English translation, we add a brief translation for information, which is indicated with asterisk.



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