Hypervisibility of Lesbians in Japan through the Analysis of Fuji TV’s Drama Series *Transit Girls* (2015)

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Abstract

Over the years 2013-2018, Japan’s mass media have become particularly interested in queer genders and their issues. The first TV drama series featuring lesbian protagonists, *Transit Girls* (2015), is a representative example of entertaining fiction in this regard. This thesis investigates, first, against which backdrop in policy-making and media environment such a program became possible and, second, in which way the increased visibility of LGBT persons contributes to implementing human rights, equal to those of heterosexual persons who present the social norm. Resting on gender studies, as well as television research and Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding of media messages for its analysis, this thesis arrives at the conclusion that lesbians’ visibility in Japan’s contemporary mainstream media is actually to be characterized as a “hypervisibility”, which helps to improve Japan’s image in view of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics without undermining heteronormativity or prompting legal change.
Conventions

All translations, unless stated otherwise, are done by the author. The transliteration of Japanese words adheres to the modified Hepburn system. Macrons are used for a, e, o and u when indicating long vowels with the exception of internationally established place names like Tokyo. The long vowel for ‘i’ is written as ‘ii’. Japanese place names, as well as commonly used words such as anime and manga, are written in plain font without italics. Japanese names are written in accordance with the Japanese format: surname preceding given name without separation by comma. Western names are written in Western format, given name preceding surname. Quotes from Japanese are translated into English.

This thesis uses the abbreviation LGBT, instead of LGBTQ. The latter abbreviation that includes Q (for queer or questioning) is more frequent in non-Japanese publications.

‘Queer’ in the context of this thesis refers to non-heterosexual individuals who actively or passively strive to achieve equal to heterosexual persons rights in society.
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Introduction

Media play an important part in shaping societal attitudes. Besides their main role as mediator of information between the represented and the viewers, they possess means to alter informational context and thereby influence public opinion. Television, in particular, “play[s] a key role in defining our cultural tastes, helping us locate ourselves in history, establishing our national identity, and ascertaining the range of national and social possibilities.”\(^1\) Due to its dominant position as distributor of information and entertainer, television continues to be widely used in almost every Japanese household, despite the growing popularity of internet usage among younger generation.

Japanese TV has a long tradition of exposing its viewers to queer hosts and tarento (young talents, usually singers and actors) in a predominantly humorous context. But cross-dressing and performing the opposite sex for entertainment is traditionally a male-dominated niche. On the other hand, Japan’s cultural industry has given rise to a huge market of male-male and female-female romance fiction for heterosexual readers, especially in the field of manga (that is, graphic narratives). Thus, Japanese entertaining media give the impression that Japan allows for visibility of queer genders, and this applies to other aspects of contemporary Japanese culture as well. However, on closer inspection, this visibility and the absence of violent expressions of hostility towards sexual minorities do often appear to serve heterosexual desire rather than human rights of LGBT persons. Fuji TV’s drama Transit Girls (2015; eight episodes) is a good example in that regard. For the first time a TV drama made lesbian love its central theme, as it focuses on two heterosexual step-sisters, 18 and 21 years of age, who as the story develops happen to get attracted to each other but face complications that derive from social norms. Transit Girls was produced by Matsumoto Ayaka (East Entertainment) and Seki Tomohiko (Cogito Works), who are the names behind the production of reality show Terrace House, well-known to Japanese audience. The script of Transit Girls was written by Kato Ayako, and the main roles are played by two young actresses Itō Sairi (as Hayama Sayuri) who had performed since childhood in theater plays and movies, and Sakuma Yui (as Shida Yui), who debuted in acting at the

time of the production of the series but had previous experiences in modelling for Platinum Model Agency.²

Transit Girls aired weekly on Fuji TV channel between November 7 and December 25, 2015 as late-night Saturday drama, and was promoted as a spin-off from the above-mentioned Terrace House. The cast also includes Kentaro, a young male actor with “baby-face and muscular body” who starred in Terrace House. Fuji TV network widely promoted Transit Girls as the first-ever lesbian drama that had similarities with the plot of Terrace House, which had a love story that occurred between (even though heterosexual) characters who lived in the same household. Due to the high ranking of Terrace House since October 2013, which reached 12 % of viewership at the time of airing of the show, it made its cast into immediate stars particularly popular among teenagers. Heart-warming affection between the protagonists of Transit Girls was promised not to disappoint Terrace House fans, and even attract broader audience by its innovativeness and uniqueness.

Oddly enough, despite all the expectations, even on the earliest stages of marketing, the series attracted a broad range of criticism from the representatives of the LGBT community, calling the series “outdated” and “sending the wrong message”.³ Already the poster, which showed two girls in white sheets on the bed, divided the minds, as it seemed misleading. Muraki Maki, a transgender and bisexual LGBT rights activist and the head of Nijiiro Diversity organisation which advocates equality of employment and working conditions for sexual minorities, stated in his interview with The Japan Times that:

Having two girls lying naked on a white sheet and using words like ‘forbidden’ is a little out of date, I think… The things we do are not about sex. We face a lot of difficulties in


our life, for example in the workplace. To be told that the image of us is one of sex doesn’t make me happy.4

Muraki even draws parallels with how the representation of LGBT persons is portrayed in American television, naming “The Modern Family”, the TV show about ordinary life challenges between various untraditional family groups as an example to aspire. According to him, Japan should head in the direction of showing more realistic stories, placing sexual minorities in more everyday-life-like situations.

In contrast to realistic, the plot of Transit Girls appears to be far from ordinary and implies controversial and questionable attributes prescribed to the portrayal of homosexual characters, such as rapid transition of the initially heterosexual protagonists to queer, the unusual “coming-out” to parents and friends, and the “pseudo-incest” nature of the same-sex love relationship. Presumably, the exaggeratedly sex-oriented interaction between the two step-sisters would more likely gain rejection rather than acceptance from the viewers. Despite that, many heterosexual viewers expressed their sympathy for the characters of Transit Girls and the whole same-sex love theme after watching the show, while representatives of homosexual and queer communities criticized marketing strategies of the promotion of the series, as well as frowned upon the poor acting and the shallow plot. According to the rankings of Yahoo! and Google, the drama was generally described as “worth watching” and “heartwarming”, having scored 7-8 points on a 10-point scale (2018).

This thesis seeks to find out whether the depiction of lesbian characters as in the TV drama series Transit Girls facilitates the heterosexual stance as societal norm, despite it being presented as pro-lesbian.

The representation, or visibility, of lesbians in Japanese mass media since 2013 is examined here with the respect to hypervisibility that has become more apparent as the result of lesbian appearances in serious context in mainstream media in recent years (2013-2018). These appearances, despite dealing with everyday issues, opposite to the

4 Online article of The Japan Times “Fuji TV announces Japan-first lesbian drama, but attracts criticism for ‘outdated’ portrayal”, from online version of The Japan Times
humorous context of variety shows hosted by male drag persona, leave an impression of not seeking to provoke to any social or political change in favor of queer genders. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that lesbian hypervisibility is more likely to breed invisibility, due to the gender roles established in Japanese society, meaning the difference in attitudes towards topics presented by men and women, where the latter ones tend to be ignored. This thesis explains the hypervisibility of homosexual women in mass media representation as new phenomenon. It illustrates the way the media affect and alter context of the projected images, texts and information, presenting them in favor that reassures heteronormativity in Japanese society.

1. Purpose of Study & Research Questions

*Transit Girls* was broadcast at a time of great changes for Japanese LGBT persons. Japan will be hosting Olympics and Paralympics in summer 2020, thus becoming the eighth-ever country honored to host this event more than once. The previous Olympic games in 1964 brought about such a considerable technologic and economic growth, that the scope of those changes moved Japan into leading position in capitalist world. It is hardly surprising that the expectations of powerful economic results from the upcoming Olympic games are huge, not to mention the amount of gold medals Japan is aiming for. This can be seen as chance for Japan to demonstrate its leadership in many industrial and technological spheres, as well as to market the country anew and build even more powerful transnational connections. Nevertheless, along with new opportunities that hosting of the Olympic games provides, it also poses a number of challenges that the hosting country is forced to face. For instance, the human rights organisations and other NGOs have intensified their pressure after the 2014 summer Olympics in Russia, where the world was shaken by the host-country’s institutionalised homophobic and discriminative actions against LGBT participants and their supporters prior and during the event.

LGBT-organisations in Japan and from overseas seized the opportunity to advocate sexual minority rights and push their issues onto political agenda, which resulted in numerous heated debates in the Diet, the Japanese National Parliament. Among the most discussed were the issues of legal recognition of same-sex marriages
and the problems of dealing with Article 24 of the New Constitution of Japan. The Article 24 states that marriage is a union between two sexes under the premonition of mutual consent. The implied assumption is that “two sexes” are a man and a woman, which is based on the system of koseki (household registration system). Accordingly, it becomes the main obstacle that prevents same-sex partners from marrying each other.  

Japan’s prime-minister, Abe Shinzō, and other members of the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) numerous expressed their conservative views upon same-sex marriage, referring to the complexity of the problem: “Extending the institution of marriage to same-sex couples was not anticipated under the current Constitution. It is an issue that concerns the very core of family values and, I believe, one that requires extremely careful consideration.”

Nevertheless, already in 2015, the government seemed to have taken a stance of raising awareness about LGBT-related issues by educating and providing information on TV and radio channels. The soft integration of LGBT questions into daily life of an ordinary Japanese TV-viewer appears to have been chosen as a more preferable political route to deal with the heated issue. It seemed to be aimed to raise social awareness about the existence of LGBT groups, rather than to change legal and social structure of the country in a more straightforward way.

Japanese mass media are officially independent from political influence and censorship, but at the same time they possess unique features that come to expression in personal preferences of presenting or omitting information that favors certain politically influential persons or groups. These bind the largest printing houses with TV and radio-broadcasters, which in their turn appear to delicately present information in the most suitable light. According to Taniguchi Masaki, the academic in media communications, the Japanese mass media are connected to each other as follows:

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5 Retrieved from the official Japanese government source

The largest shareholder of Yomiuri Shimbun is Nippon Television, the largest shareholder of Asahi Shimbun is TV Asahi, and of Nihon Keizai Shimbun, TV Tokyo. Conversely, Fuji TV is under the Sankei Shimbun umbrella. Mainichi Shimbun and the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) group have a weak capital relationship, but they have friendly relations and the president of Mainichi Shimbun serves as an outside director of TBS. Similarly, numerous regional TV stations were formed by regional newspapers. Using the power to issue broadcast licenses to these TV station groups, the government can exert influence on newspaper companies.  

Taniguchi explains, that despite the apparent influence of the political circles over the newspapers and, therewith over TV channel-broadcasters, it is more common to rely on soft politics of shaping public opinion rather than on direct bold interference and confrontation. Furthermore, talk shows, games, commercials and entertainment programs appear to have broader impact on social masses in comparison to political campaigns. For instance, even news broadcasts that deal with “hard topics” find use of softening the latter by means of flip-cards, charts, onscreen texting, as well as by mixing in entertainment information, like cooking and daily shopping tips. Needless to say, the way in which information is presented or omitted plays a vital role in how it gets absorbed by the consumers of the conveyed message.

While the problems concerning sexual minority groups in Japan have been receiving more attention in media, they subsequently gained more support of population as well, partly due to scandals concerning suicides in schools, discrimination on workplace, insufficiency of legal system to provide help to students who are identified to suffer from the so-called sexual identity disorder. The impact of mainstream media and the involvement of NGOs was so great that it resulted on the change on political front when Hase Hiroshi, a sexual minority activist, was appointed as minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2015. Hase directly expressed his intention

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to advocate rights of LGBT students of elementary and junior-high schools and bring to public attention guidelines how to aid homo- and transsexual youth.⁹

The positive changes for sexual minorities, unimaginable for less than a decade ago took even further development when in April 2015 Shibuya ward located in the Tokyo metropolis, announced its intention to issue same-sex partnership certificates valid within its boarder starting November the same year.¹⁰ Despite the certificate’s symbolic meaning, as it did not grant legal rights or obligations to the parties, it signalized an overall shift to a more welcoming public opinion when discussing same-sex couples. Shortly after, in July, the Shibuya wards’ example was followed by Setagaya ward and later by city of Takarazuka. On April 19, large press-conference was gathered to cover wedding ceremony between two celebrities: model Ichinose Ayaka and actress Sugimori Akane who shared their joyful news with the Japanese press, posing for cameras in white western-style wedding dresses.¹¹

The interest of Japanese press and TV appeared to have shifted from drag-entertainers towards lesbians, who, in contrast to drag culture of comical character, conveyed about everyday obstacles they face in private life and at work. Therewith begun the era of extensive visibility or, as this thesis refers to this phenomenon, hypervisibility that evolved around Japanese homosexual women. Simultaneously with this characteristic development, the Fuji TV’s production of Transit Girls came into being.

When looking at the reception and the criticism after having watched Transit Girls drama, the research questions that this thesis seeks to answer are formulated as follows:

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⁹ “New education minister vows to promote LGBT rights, use Olympics to push social issues”, online version of The Japan Times retrieved from https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/10/15/national/politics-diplomacy/new-education-minister-vows-promote-lgbt-rights-use-olympics-push-social-issues/#.W0MiC0KauCQ (18/07/14)

¹⁰ “The First Place In East Asia To Welcome Same-Sex Marriage”, online version of the National Public Radio retrieved from https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/11/404822093/the-first-place-in-east-asia-to-welcome-same-sex-marriage?t=1532448218015 (18/07/12)

• What made the creation of the lesbian-themed drama possible in 2015?
• Are there any distinguishable elements that can be understood as promotion of heteronormativity in the drama?
• How does the audience of the drama interpret these elements and the contents of the drama in general?

This thesis concentrates on the analysis of lesbian representation in Transit Girls, basing on the GLAAD reports framework for identification of elements that can been seen as stereotypical portrayal of homosexual characters in fictional TV series. The effects of the audience reception are analyzed with the help of implication of Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding of media messages in television discourse.

This thesis seeks to find out what kind of lesbian visibility is offered by popular fiction on TV, and in which way the popular-cultural representation of lesbians may contribute to the increase in their positive image and last but not least, the contribution with this thesis attempts to fill the gap in existent academia due to the lack of Japanese language scholarship as the subject demonstrates.

**Thesis Structure**

Japanese society can still be characterized as cautious about same-sex relationships and queer genders in various aspects. Nevertheless, there are indications of overall public tolerance without aggression and signs of hostility, opposite to those noted throughout Western and American history. The latter ones resulted in revolutionary actions and riots and pushed forward great LGBT-movement formations in Western countries. The Japanese silent above-mentioned tolerance can in its turn be linked to the history of same-sex relationships, mostly of male-male character as the historical references indicate. Not to mention the importance of ie – the patriarchal hierarchical structure of the society that strongly prescribed family values and meanings of marriage and reproduction, which has been to great extent preserved in Japanese society up to present day. Homosexuality, despite being documented for example in shunga drawings (genre of erotic images in pre-modern Japan), never had a stance of what in modern times is classified as sexual orientation. Normativity was and still is based strictly on heterosexual grounds.
Therefore, the importance of this thesis lies in its intention to investigate how the production of first lesbian drama was possible in terms of heteronormativity in modern Japan. The visibility of lesbians in mass media is explained by firstly linking it to the queer normalization theory and secondly by the qualitative research of the case-study of *Transit Girls* that also focuses on symbolism and context manipulation found in Japanese mass media broadcasts. The method used in this thesis is a combination of the identified symbolic elements with embedded meaning in *Transit Girls* and the borrowed from the GLAAD’s report stereotypical features of portrayal of homosexual characters in TV shows. By the symbolic elements this thesis implies usage of audio effects and focusing on certain moments in recaps, followed by presence of objects or actions in important movie scenes (shrines, graveyards and praying). Furthermore, the use of description words like “forbidden love” in promotion of the series can be seen as attempt to create conditions against acceptance of relationship between homosexual protagonists.

This thesis exemplifies how symbolic attributes add to the decoding of the ‘message’ in a way that even deeper reassures heteronormativity as correct form of intimate relationships in modern Japanese society. At the same time, it appears to tolerate the ‘forbidden’ homosexual relationship as long is does not seek public acceptance.

**Delimitations of the Research**
This thesis will concentrate exclusively on lesbian portrayal in *Transit Girls*. The reason for that is twofold. Firstly, according to a GLAAD report from 2016, the representation of gay characters in media is frequently inaccurate and based on stereotypes. Studying only one section of the underrepresented LGBT group can improve the better understanding of this group. Secondly, American TV, according to the same report, is prone to stereotyping homosexual individuals by prescribing them “gay” lifestyle, appearance and behavioral patterns. Nevertheless, such portrayal of

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homosexuality does not necessarily project the image that associates with the “wrong” or “negative”, but at the same time it registers in the mind of the viewer as opposite to “normal”.¹⁵ Fisher et al., for instance, argue that the media that currently continue reinforcing stereotypical apprehending of gendered roles and models, have the power to change this inaccurate portrayal of homosexual characters and therefore affect the attitudes of the viewers towards them. Presently, many of the portrayals of gay and lesbian relations shown in fictional drama do not fit either homosexual or heterosexual norm. They stand out as odd and bizarre, unsuitable to be integrated into society.

Viewer’s reception of the TV series *Transit Girls*, described in the section “Viewer’s Reception” is functioning in this thesis as an illustrative example of the drama’s popularity among Japanese viewers, as well as it brings up points of criticism from viewers’ perspective. As this thesis is not intended to stretch and cover a deep sociological study, neither does it have space for quantitative analysis of viewer’s reception data over time, it can only provide samples of opinions, which are, in terms of this research, sufficient indicators of positive and negative attitudes towards the LGBT-themed drama itself. Relevance of these reviews, despite being minimal in quantity, is evident, as it helps to reach the conclusion about the projected image of sexual minorities and the received one.

2. Theory and Method

Positive and accurate representation of sexual minorities in a pioneer television project can undeniably be viewed as a challenging task for creators of the show. Therefore, accuracy of lesbian portrayal in *Transit Girls* is expressed by illustration of homosexual versus heterosexual portrayal of characters in the same show. Moreover, this thesis aims to demonstrate the importance of integrating the ‘normalizing’ lesbian image, which creates basis for social acceptance of homosexuality as norm, equal to or approaching the one suggested by heteronormativity.

Historically, minority groups are prone to be victims of stereotypical and/or comical portrayal in television series, movies and variety shows. Lesbian representation in Japanese fictional movies, following the described American tradition, appears to have similar pattern of stereotyping: lesbians are portrayed as overly sex-oriented and opposing social norms in a self-centered way (being prescribed the role of villains that strongly contrasts with the victim role of heterosexual characters). This thesis will investigate the extent, to which the lesbian protagonists are portrayed positively, correctly and non-stereotypically in Transit Girls, basing on the GLAAD’s framework for analysis, namely looking closely at the characters’ lifestyles, villain or victim roles, their behavioral patterns and whether those fit or do not fit under societal norms.

The method this thesis finds use of is based on studying the elements of character portrayal on TV: villain/victim role, character’s portrayal in context, usage of stereotypes as well as combining those with elements of context manipulation. The term “context manipulation” is carefully and thoroughly explained in this thesis, in the section “Elements of Context Manipulation”. It is used as an umbrella term for techniques of editing and presenting information for public masses in an angled way. Context manipulation is a term created specifically for this thesis, and is not meant as negative, but rather as descriptive action, implying subjectivity of presenting information. Under this term, and as a part of the method used in this thesis, the following elements are taking into the framework for analysis: background object usage for building certain associations (usage of shrine, praying) along with usage of pre-projected image about the protagonists on the marketing stage of the show (“forbidden”, “lesbians”, two girls naked in bed). One more element is included in the analysis, namely the promotion of Transit Girls in relation to Terrace House. Components that are expected to build strong connections with Terrace House appear to be missing, despite the promotion of Transit Girls as a spin-off from the already popular show Terrace House. This thesis uses analysis and identification of the missing elements to reflect upon the meaning with the projected image of lesbianism and with the Fuji TV’s drama Transit Girls itself.

This thesis rests on Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding of media messages to demonstrate the link between the creators of Transit Girls, the audience and how the viewers’ reception demonstrate attitudes towards LGBT individuals in
society in whole. It also helps to understand why some elements of the show were less likely to gain acceptance, and the other ones caused critical reviews.

Queer theory is not being applied in this thesis as part of the main analysis. The thesis uses the term “queer” as it is described in “Conventions”, namely referring to “queer” as the one that differs from normal but seeks to be included in norms.

**Stuart Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding of Media Messages in Television Discourse**

This theory was developed to investigate and explain the correlation between the impact of mass media and the audience. The representation theory of encoding and decoding by Stuart Hall suggests that audience is never a passive recipient of the message transmitted by mass media. Hall argues that the audience (decoder) takes an active role towards the message (text in form of news, programs, movies) transmitted by the encoder (media). He distinguishes three hypothetic outcomes of interpretation: the opposing stance to the initial meaning of the message, the negotiation/partial acceptance of the viewer and the complete acceptance. Hall asserts that numerous factors affect how the message will be interpreted by the viewers on every stage of the communication, starting with the production and finishing with the measuring the effects of outcomes.

In case of *Transit Girls*, according to the creators of the show and the Fuji TV network representatives, the message was to show a heart-warming story of romantic relationship between two girls, the story that could occur in a modern Japanese society. The idea behind the production was hardly intended to mock or negatively picture lesbian attraction, but on the contrary to bring it in a frame of ordinary student-life situation. Hall’s theory helps to understand, why the viewers react so differently to the drama.

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3. Lesbians in Japan: Approaching the Societal Issue Through the Lens of Japanese Studies Research

There is a limited amount of academia on LGBT-representation in Japanese media. Nevertheless, several names are particularly interesting in terms of queer gender research. James Welker, an associate professor of social and cultural studies, has written numerous articles on lesbian movement and establishment of lesbian community in Japan. His current projects focus on popular art, manga and gender roles in contemporary Japanese society. Mark McLelland is a historian and sociologist, professor of Australian University of Wollonggong. He has published academic articles on queer representation in Japanese media, focused on post-war history of queer cultures, and is a co-founder of AsiaPacificQueer, which organised Genders Sexualities and Rights International Conference in Bangkok, 2005. Doi Kanae of Human Rights Watch has been actively working on urging criticism towards Japanese national newspapers (*Asahi Shimbum*) demanding the more correct and inclusive LGBT representation in the published by the newspaper articles. Claire Maree, an Australian academic, has recently added to this research field with articles on queerbaiting, bringing up the question of the quality of the representation provided by current hypervisibility of sexual minorities in mainstream media.

In general, the research on the LGBT-representation has been concentrated on questions related to history, invisibility, queerness, manga and the legal obstacles that prevent successful achievement of equal rights between the homo- and heterosexual Japanese population. The local Japanese academic research on LGBT is still insufficient and is in its developmental stage.

**On the History of the Female Homosexual Community in Japan**

As previously mentioned, the research on queer genders and identities as well as the roles, prescribed to them by mainstream media, is complicated and the material on the subject is frequently controversial.
In the case of Japan, the historical development of LGBT movement had a more peaceful flow, in contrast to other parts of the world. Taking as example African (Senegal, Yemen, Nigeria, Sudan, Mauritania) and the Middle-Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates) that even in modern days exercise imprisonment, public physical punishment and even execution by death, in case of suspicion on homosexuality.17

Post-war Japan has not exercised extreme cases of hostility towards homosexual individuals, which implies a relative acceptance of homosexual persons even in modern times. Tokyo’s districts Shibuya and Shinjuku are worldwide known for their rainbow-entertainments and homosexual nightclub scenes. These areas serve the purpose not only as zones for socializing between homosexual persons, but also as cultural institutions that help to discover, establish and embrace one’s queer identity, outside otherwise strictly prescribed gender roles.

James Welker in his article “Telling Her Story: Narrating a Japanese Lesbian Community” illustrates the importance of personal stories, as the ones that help to shape queer identity. He reflects upon the fact that a vast amount of information on lesbian- and queer studies was borrowed and translated from western scholars. Furthermore, the adaptation of the academic and fictional literature to the Japanese readership helps to create circles of interested and engaged persons. Stories written by or about lesbians, make, therefore, an important component that helps to build queer community, shape lesbian identity, and also affect how the community will be seen from the outside of it by other members of society, queer and heterosexual.18 Consequently, these stories should be projected in a way corresponding with the needs of the minority group and aid to advocate its positive image in society.

Welker argues that many of the elements that helped to shape Japanese lesbian community were inspired by the American gay boom of the 90s, by academic texts on homosexuality, and by overall inspiration found in these texts. Nevertheless, Welker brings to attention that some elements were borrowed from the West while others were

17 “7 worst capital punishments for being gay”, online version of Ranker https://www.ranker.com/list/7-worst-capital-punishments-for-being-illegally-gay/joanne(retrieved 2018/07/14)

born in Japan due to the uniqueness of Japanese culture, traditions and family values. Translations of academic works on homosexuality from English made by Japanese scholars were also adapted to suit Japanese readership. Furthermore, the gender-related concepts including terminology were partially integrated into Japanese vocabulary. These do not necessarily carry the same meaning as in their original language. For instance, the term *rezubian* (lesbian) is a broad term for “female-female desire” that does not distinguish between lesbian gender identities (for instance: bisexual women, or women still in question of their orientation, or more masculine or butch women with preference towards more ‘lady-like’ women or transsexual individuals mtf). The term *rezu* or *rezubian* has also been integrated into Japanese queer vocabulary, but also suffered through the local adaptation: in Japan it recently earned a negative meaning, coming from strong associations with pornography. As Chalmers describes it, “[t]he connection of lesbianism with pornography is so strong that most women on first hearing or seeing the word *rezu* (lezzo) associate it with pornography […] denying lesbians a psycho-sexual identity in which to claim a social space in which to move.”

Talking about pre-historical development of attitudes towards homosexual interactions, of special interest could be to relate those to Japan’s religions throughout the history.

Religious prohibition did not affect Japan’s views upon homosexuality, in the same way as in the West. Christianity, that sees homosexuality as sin, was never a major religion in Japan, giving instead space to Shintoism and Buddhism, and reserving special place for Confucianism as ideology. Furthermore, homosexual interactions were exercised in Buddhist monasteries between monks and pre-adolescent boys and later even by samurai and their apprentices during training and battles.

With the rise of the entertainment industry in Edo, homosexual interactions came to expression in form of the commercialised sex industry, where young kabuki actors frequented in engaging in prostitution with their wealthy admirers.

19 Welker, J. 2011, pp. 120-121.
The modern wave of development of homosexuality can be related to the ban on homosexual relationships in Japan by the Meiji Legal Code. It made homosexual interaction a criminal act under Article 266 in 1872. For the first and only time in the history of Japanese law same-sex activity became criminally punishable. Nevertheless, the ban was lifted shortly after, in 1880, and up to the present day has not been reinforced.

Despite the above-described tolerance of homosexuality throughout history, modern Japanese society appears skeptical and even unwilling to embrace unions between same sexes. While in the West many countries have already legalized same-sex marriage as human right, the case of Japan is different. Despite the recently growing support in favor of legalizing same-sex unions by public masses, the amount of openly non-heterosexual activists who advocate positive political reforms is much smaller. As of 2017 in the report conducted by NHK it shows that 51 % of the questioned were positive towards legalizing same-same marriages in Japan. Presumably that to achieve drastic shifts in heteronormative attitudes towards the more inclusive ones, which would allow homosexuality as complementary to heterosexuality norm, an accurate, systematic, consistent and delicate representation of the alternative solutions of the problem to societal masses would be of special importance. While same-sex unions are being viewed as problematic, abnormal or are being plainly ignored as nonexistent, the advocacy of the progress becomes a hopeless case. Accordingly, positive representation and visibility can be seen as powerful tool capable with the help of the media to aid in progress towards inclusiveness, gender equality and democracy in modern society.

Queer Representation in Japanese Media and Hypervisibility

Since 2013, the Japanese media have been anything but passive in making sexual minorities a part of everyday social life, firstly, by creating the second wave of popularity of male onē-kyara tarento. At the same time, hypervisibility, along with the

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25 From online article from 2017/05/04 on CAN http://m.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/201705040394.aspx
26 Queen-character
angled representation of “queer” by mainstream TV has simultaneously led to exploitation of queer genders by heterosexual audience.

In contrast to tarento - featuring shows of 80-90s when drag-queens/ kings were portrayed by transsexuals and homosexuals, the modern-time drag performances are frequently just staged and acted by heterosexual entertainers who behave “womanly” or queerly for the purpose of creating humorous atmosphere around. These onē-kyara have fused into show-business niche and relying on their fame, managed to spread into all layers of prosperous careers, from make-up artists to singers, and are usually seen as such: successful and influential celebrity-entertainers. The benefits of queer persons’ representation from drag-shows of this nature are questionable. Accurate and positive portrayal of queer sexes by means of entertainment industry seems unrealistic as it projects a very specific and angled image which the viewer associates with mockery, laughter, humor, same as when watching performances of onē-kyara. As a result, this kind of visibility only promotes and reasserts the heteronormality as paradigm, instead of crushing it.

Between the years of 2006-2011, NHK’s program hāto o tsunagō (“Connecting Hearts”) attempted to break the well-established pattern of comical representation of sexual minorities on TV by producing a series of short 30-minute documentaries that told stories of ordinary LGBT activists and the problems they faced in everyday life. Unfortunately, the show divided between on the one hand heterosexual host non-tōjisha (not directly concerned person), and on the other hand- the queer guests, tōjisha. The role of the latter was to confess about life issues problematized by their sexuality and then to call to the audiences’ sympathy. Naturally, the guests who participated in the show, had to be prepared to come out of the closet in front of the potentially millions of heterosexual viewers, including family, colleagues and friends. Initially the representation was supposed to positively engage the audience in awareness of LGBT-related issues, but, despite being portrayed in a realistic way, once again, it suggested

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the sexual minorities to be unfit, problematic and pitiful. Surprisingly enough, many homo- and transsexual viewers responded by writing letters to the studio, inspired by the participants of the show to announce their queer sexuality on public TV.

Academic Suganuma Katsuhiko sees more positive queer representation in media, which came with the previously mentioned symbolic wedding between celebrity Higashi Koyuki and her lesbian partner in Tokyo Disneyland in 2013. Higashi’s impact on lesbian visibility in media can be linked to her background within entertainment industry as successful performer in Takarazuka (traditional theatre with female performance in all roles). Her marriage in Disneyland made her the representative face of the modern Japanese lesbian community. She published several articles on lesbian issues, most of which were highlighted in Asahi and Mainichi, the two largest daily newspapers in Japan. Higashi and her partner became also the first-registered lesbian couple to receive the same-sex partnership certificate in Shibuya.

Recently, as it appears, the lesbian visibility in media has reached a new level of expression of popularity. The news coverages, host-shows and documentaries provide material on sex-minority daily issues, which is different from the previous comic-humorous context associated with queer-men. This phenomenon is explained by Martha Gever who suggests that the choice of women as voices for LGBT-community at whole is a well-thought-through tactics. She argues, that the role of a woman in contemporary Japanese society still associates with obedience, tolerance, kindness and secondary to a man’s position’s role, there is no risk that issues advocated by women would result political change. Gever asserts that “lesbians are neither real women, nor real homosexuals”. Naturally, media conveniently exploit lesbians as propagators for LGBT-rights, increasing visibility of the minorities in a safe way.

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31 Suganuma, 2011.

The issues that are brought to public attention by women do not pose threat to heteronormative societal order. Besides being in the minority as a woman, when it comes to distribution of power and influential positions in the society, lesbians become an even further marginalised social group with even weaker voices, incapable of making change on big level.

Any social reform requires bringing it to discussion on political level. Globalisation, internet and intercontinental culture exchange have brought in not only academic material from the West, but implicitly created examples to aspire for, the hope that Japanese queer activists could work for. Legalisation of same-sex unions in the West, normalisation and anti-discrimination laws also gave birth to transnational institutions, which promote and evaluate LGBT rights around the globe, aiding the cause.

Same-sex couples in Japan found of course ways of coping with legal discrimination of same-sex unions: for example, by means of registering their relationship in form of adoption: the older partner adopts the younger and assigns the latter as legal family member. As officially registered in koseki household register, the partner then acquires the right for hospital visitations, joint apartment rentals and heritage. Unfortunately, the legal rights as a couple have so far been granted only to those who got married to foreigners in country that recognizes same-sex marriages, thereby creating a paradigm: forcing Japanese to seek love not with native Japanese, but with a foreigner. Otherwise prone to expression of homophobia and frowning upon mixed-race unions, the current legal system pushes its queer citizens to engage in gaijin-marriages.³³

Elements of Context Manipulation

Claire Maree, an academic specializing on research on queer genders in Japan, describes in her publication named Sexual Minorities (seiteki shōsūha) in Japan that the Japanese TV media have been world-wide known for their broad usage of visual and audio effects which accompany every show of any genre in form of on-screen texts and

³³ Here: gaijin is used with a negative accent, instead of neutral gaikokujin. Both stand for “foreigner”.
emphasis markers (exclamation marks, blank space), as well as background narration when explaining, clarifying or bringing another perspective into the minds of the audience.\textsuperscript{34} One more spectacular feature of TV programs is extensive usage of flip-cards when presenting polls or new information.\textsuperscript{35} These tools appear both in humorous shows and in fact-based broadcasts. The onscreen texts appeal to the audience by stressing or undermining the importance of what is being said. These texts have a common function with Western show’s prerecorded audience laughter.

Quintessential for effective manipulating of contents by onscreen texts plays timing, style, color and size of the used font, emojis, their location on the screen and the embedded association. The supporting sounds, noise and music also play important addition to the visuals, as they make ‘context manipulation’ even more prominent.

This thesis uses term context manipulation’ implying the editor’s power to stress, focus on and/or undermine parts or even blocks of important information. Context manipulation is a general and vague term, which can refer to altering of information, angling context or omitting important details. It is also a problematic term which this thesis does not seek to investigate in detail, due to impossibility to achieve or measure an absolute objectivity even in fact-based programs. This thesis assumes that every person involved in production and distribution of ‘message’ or information brings with a particle of personal interpretation, which can be seen in various elements: in an extra-long pause in a speech, in a gesture of a speaker, in facial expressions or tone of voice, in shifts of camera focus and angle and in time of transmitting and moments chosen for commercial breaks. Context manipulation is not necessarily a negative editing but can be described as more personal and less general projections of subjective reality.

The example of how sexual minority visibility in media is being affected by the context manipulation is examined by scholar Maree on the example of daily news programme \textit{N-Sta-}, which was broadcast by TBS in 2013. One of the episodes was dedicated to covering the lesbian wedding ceremony in Tokyo Disneyland resort, where a female guest of the ceremony briefly mentioned her past-time affair with one of the


newly married women. The guest directly apologized for the fact of bringing it to attention and asked not to give out her name “for the sake of her child”. The onscreen text stressed the words “forgive” and “for the sake of the child”, which created visual markers in the viewers’ brain, causing subconscious associations that signalizes a link between lesbian-marriage and asking for societal “forgiveness”. The accent, therewith, was editorially shifted from the happy lesbian couple getting married to asking for forgiveness.

The result of this association can be seen as if forgiveness in whichever context it is mentioned when put alongside lesbian marriage is essential for the homosexual unions to exist within the wider society. Under this premonition, the ‘message’ fits seamlessly within the heteronormative ideological parameters that are being projected by mainstream early-evening news programs to the broad audience, thus shaping social attitudes.  

Flip-cards are but another broadly used tool when it comes to introducing new information or presenting it in an angled way. In the following example, it comes to expression when taking to pieces the segment of the series Shinsō hōdō Bankisha! (June 7, 2015, NTV).  

The abbreviation LGBT appears on the screen, with the letters vertically situated, leaving blank space for the “clarification” of the term. Interesting enough, continues Maree, that the host of the show, who clarifies the terms, as if takes stance of a teacher repeatedly coming back to what LGBT stands for, thoroughly explaining every letter with help of flip-cards and other visuals, supposing that the audience is unfamiliar with the meaning behind the abbreviation. The explained term is presented as new phenomenon. Furthermore, despite the hypervisibility or extensive attention to sexual minorities in media, they succeed in projecting an image that is not registered within the viewer’s mind as norm, but rather than something opposite, unfamiliar, a newly-learnt-about phenomenon. By means of angled contextualization of

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37 Ibid.
material and on-screen flip-cards, this visibility reassures heteronormativity in modern Japanese society.  

4. Case-study of the Transit Girls

To understand the meaning and impact of the lesbian drama Transit Girls as well as the message imbedded within it and how it is projected to broader public, this thesis looks closely at the plot of the drama, at the characters’ portrayal and further even at the reception by viewers and critics.

The plot of the drama is uncomplicated. Two girls, Sayuri and Yui, get together by the sudden marriage of their parents. Sayuri’s mother has been dead for two years and the girl refuses to accept Madoka, her father’s new wife. Sayuri is also reluctant towards Yui, Madoka’s grown-up daughter who moves in to live with them together. Initially rude towards Yui, Sayuri gradually warms up to her and eventually discovers passionate romantic feelings towards her step-sister. Yui in her turn, as older and more experienced, discovers her lesbian side at the first glance when she takes photos of Sayuri not yet knowing that she would turn out to become her relative. Yui confesses to Sayuri that she only had heterosexual relationships before they met. Nevertheless, she embraces those feelings without a second thought as if “her heart suddenly found peace”, as she explains herself. Sayuri, on the contrary reacts strongly on the confusing affection from her step-sister. Her own feelings she harvests by fighting inner battles with herself, that gradually shift from the “confused and scared” to the “ashamed but happy”.

Furthermore, as the protagonists accept their romantic feelings for each other they decide to keep it a secret from others. Their relationship rapidly evolves from a kiss, to sharing a bath and to spending a night together. Madoka, Yui’s mother, accidentally discovers the girls in the same bed and confronts them. She is ashamed and experiences shock of the situation but after a hesitation she confesses to her husband,

Sayuri’s father. The girls come out to Madoka as a couple, where Yui is more open and defending her feelings towards Sayuri, while Sayuri remains quiet most of the time, with her head down in shame. This causes Yui to leave the house for good, leaving only a thanking note behind for Sayuri. Her mother Madoka is also incapable of continuing to stay in that house, as she feels ashamed of the situation cause by her daughter. Interesting enough but Sayuri’s father is the one who acts calmly, even supporting of the two girls’ relationship. During conversation with Madoka, he confesses that he had a feeling that Sayuri would turn out that way, as she was traumatized by her mother’s death.

The story finishes without a conclusive ending, besides the fact that Sayuri decides to find Yui, no matter what. The final scene shows Sayuri and Yui praying at the very same shrine, where Yui saw Sayuri for the first time. They close their arms around each other and share a kiss.

What kind of feeling does a viewer accumulate after 8 episodes of Transit Girls? Before the series was released to the public, it labeled the portrayal of the relationship between the two main characters as “forbidden” and “lesbian”, contrasting it to normal, acceptable and non-queer.

Associations with the character and scene portrayal serve as independent symbols, which carry special meaning. For instance, when Sayuri revises English vocabulary in the very first episode of the drama, she names the words and their translations correctly. This creates the image of her being an excellent student. At the same time, when we meet Yui’s ex-partner and current boss, we notice that he is the only character in the drama who is played by a foreigner. The inbuilt association with seeing a contrasting figure to the rest of the cast could be for instance signaling Yui’s liberal attitude towards social norms, but it could even be understood as a warning sign which shows that homosexuality is close to and can be associated with foreign influence.

There are well-distinguishable elements throughout the series in the character’s body language, manners, form of speech, social background, their choice of clothing in combination with situations which the characters are put in (for example, meeting at the shrine, confrontation while sitting on the bed, interaction with foreigners), they provide subtle manipulation of how the viewer reads the message. Shrine by itself can be seen as symbol of fertility, while two lesbian protagonists praying for their future can
become associated with asking for forgiveness or hoping for miracle when it comes to lesbian love.

Stuart Hall asserts that production of the message is a complex process that will affect the result of how the information will be consumed by the decoder (audience). This thesis argues that the creators of *Transit Girls*, relying on symbolic and contextual manipulation, portrayed same-sex love as forbidden, abnormal and problematic for society. Therewith, this thesis returns to conclusion that despite being marketed as pro-lesbian, *Transit Girls* TV drama can be seen as a very weak attempt to promote homosexual love. Instead it reinforces heteronormative values, leaving space for homosexual couples to be tolerated as long as they remain invisible.

**Viewers’ Reception**

According to Google viewer’s ranking, 95% of the viewers liked *Transit Girls* after watching it.\(^{40}\) For instance, the reviews published on the Japanese Yahoo! TV site gave the series an overall rating of 3.82 points out of 5, based on 62 opinions.\(^ {41}\) Interestingly enough, 60% of the ratings are made by top scores, while 24% gave the show the lowest one-star rating. This difference in extremities can depend on various components, like age or social background of the viewer, sexual orientation, whether one was ranking the show individually or other reviewers were present in the same room and how long time passed between the broadcast of the show and the moment of rating etc.

In short, building a more accurate picture about drama’s popularity and viewers’ reception would require a deeper systematic quantitative analysis over time with a more limited scope of studied data and more well-determined variables affecting outcomes of such research. Therefore, this thesis gives only a sample of how *Transit Girls* is addressed in social media, without attempting to generalize reception rates. The following reviews function as example of viewer’s thoughts on the drama.

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\(^{40}\) Google tv series ratings based on likes. Retrieved from https://www.google.se/search?q=transit+girls&newwindow=1&client=opera&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjH6Iyyv7fcAhXS0aYKHTprDJIQ_AUICSGgA&biw=1200&bih=612&dpr=1 18-07-2

\(^{41}\) Japan Yahoo! Television series reviews. Retrieved from https://tv.yahoo.co.jp/review/282773/
“This is a drama that saturates youth”,\(^42\) (positive)

“An astonishing performance of actress for Yui (older sister). I was immediately infatuated.”\(^43\) (positive)

“Requires deeper character development before introducing the kiss scene in the very first episode. Very confusing.”\(^44\) (negative).

Furthermore, on the official homepage of *Transit Girls* in the section of reviews and comments it appears that the most recent comments are dated February 2018. Conclusively, despite the decrease in the amount of posts by years, there still appears to be the clearly upheld interest towards the *Transit Girls* series. Amongst the most frequently appearing comments are requests to speed up the release of TG in DVD format. For example, a waitress in her 40-s writes “Please release TG on DVD as soon as possible”.\(^45\) The same request appears even in 2018 from the office-worker Omo in her 30s.\(^46\) Threads that ask for further development of the story also appear even in recent posts from 2018.

A 30-year old female office worker under alias M states that she wishes the drama that is dedicated to such a wonderful topic as same-sex love was made earlier. “Because it is not impossible, that one would get attracted to same-sex”, says the reviewer.\(^47\)

The female Riyo in her 20s (occupation: other) writes, “I would really love to see more of their relationship! This drama left me with so many thoughts. I was

\(^{42}\) From the review of exi*****灾区 (2015/11/8) retrieved from https://tv.yahoo.co.jp/review/detail/282773/?rid=14469099228046.a1b9.13262&o=2&s=2 (2018/07/24)

\(^{43}\) From the review of hoj*****灾区 (2015/11/8) retrieved from https://tv.yahoo.co.jp/review/282773/?o=2 (2018/07/24)

\(^{44}\) From the review of sea*****灾区 (2015/11/9) retrieved from https://tv.yahoo.co.jp/review/detail/282773/?rid=14470011033220.abd0.05772&o=2&s=9 (2018/07/24)

\(^{45}\) From review retrieved from http://www.fujitv.co.jp/transitgirls/_basic/resp/index-2.html (2016/05/04 23:25:52)

\(^{46}\) From review retrieved from http://www.fujitv.co.jp/transitgirls/_basic/resp/index-1.html (2018/02/22 14:04:45)

\(^{47}\) From the review retrieved from http://www.fujitv.co.jp/transitgirls/_basic/resp/index-1.html (2017/05/19 20:47:11)
cheering for them throughout the series, honesty towards oneself and the counterpart is reflected so that it makes one think deeply. The acting performance of the lead actresses was amazing.48

Toranjikko, male office worker in his 30s describes the drama as one that has touched his heart. Yui’s character, stresses the reviewer, still remains within [his heart] even after two years.49

The other commentaries request a happy ending between the two girls, soundtrack release, repeat of the show and continuation of the series after Sayuri enters college.

The majority of the comments in Fuji TV review page are left by women in their 30s and 40s with main occupation office-worker. Among male audience most commonly appear university students in their 20s. The most frequent request published on this page between 2015 and 2018 is about DVD release.

There are no explicitly negative posts about the series or its production on the Fuji TV’s page about Transit Girls. Presuming, that the reviews and commentaries might have been filtered away by the administrators and never came to be published, the above-provided data can be only seen as rough example of opinions about the drama.

Analysis of Media Message Based on Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding

In accordance with Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding of media messages, the production of the message is the first step before the decoding by the recipient begins.50

Looking at the shift in political and social attitudes towards LGBT issues in Japan in recent years, this thesis suggests that the production of Transit Girls is

48 From review retrieved from http://www.fujitv.co.jp/transitgirls/_basic/resp/index-1.html (2018/02/17 21:06:22)
49 From review retrieved from http://www.fujitv.co.jp/transitgirls/_basic/resp/index-1.html (2018/01/12 01:59:45)
influenced by the new age of media hypervisibility. It can be understood as the result of political course aiming to increase social awareness of LGBT issues under the pressure of transnational NGOs, especially in light of the upcoming Olympic games of 2020. Resting on tactics of soft politics, sexual minorities in Japan have now been offered extensive attention in mainstream media coverages, with focus on lesbian issues as main theme. This thesis reaches to conclusion, that the production of lesbian-themed romantic fictional TV series can be seen as less challenging in comparison to male homosexual love theme.

This thesis distinguishes following aspects that indirectly point to favoring of heteronormativity embedded within Transit Girls:

Firstly, the drama was marketed as a spin-off from the reality show Terrace House and appealed to teenaged viewership. At the same time, Transit Girls was broadcast as late-evening Saturday drama, the timeslot that is prone to be reserved for adult family entertainment, rather than for teenage romance shows. Secondly, the cast of Transit Girls is exclusively new, aside from Kentaro who portrays a heterosexual (!) childhood friend desperately in love with one of the lesbian protagonists, Sayuri. Kentaro’s character appears as victim who suffers from the protagonists’ lesbian relationship. Due to the actor’s popularity amongst teenaged fans it could also become an obstacle for lesbian characters in Transit Girls.

Secondly, the two main characters, protagonists Yui and Sayuri, are played by non-celebrity actresses. Idols in Japan are frequently used for promotional purposes of important events, programs, television series and commercials. Talents are often involved in multiple fields of show-business, boosting interest of audience even by their name or appearance in a show. For instance, Kimura Takuya, also known as KimuTaku, an actor, celebrity, singer and entertainer has such a broad and varied number of fans, that they immediately generate response to his promotions, from commercials to new dramas. In Transit Girls, on the other hand, the main roles are occupied by unexperienced actresses without idol-image, thereby producing a less influential example.
Thirdly, the plot of the story is not completely innovative. It possesses features similar to the ones that associate with genre of shōjo manga.\textsuperscript{51} This genre of narratives frequently centers around girls who get attracted to each other while being in their high-school age. The described in these manga relationships are often innocent or seen as a passing experimental stage and not as one’s true orientation. One another commonality with shōjo manga, is that the heroines themselves are prone to discover their affection towards another girl as singular and unique. It is therefore not a change of heterosexuality but a special attitude only towards exactly that person, who happens to be a girl. \textit{Transit Girls} offers similar perspective onto Yui and Sayuri’s love. Both protagonists explicitly express their interest in men until they experience and discover their feelings for each other, being indifferent towards other female characters of the show.

According to the Hall’s model of decoding and encoding of media messages, viewer’s reaction to the drama will correspond with the intention of the producers in the hegemonic position of decoding if the producers and the audience share the same cultural background and values.\textsuperscript{52}

The reaction of viewers can also be negotiation, meaning that it combines acceptance of some elements of the message and opposition towards other elements. In case of this position, personal lifestyles and habits of every viewer will affect how the message will be understood and viewed.

The last hypothetical position of interpretation is based on complete opposition. It implies that the audience understands what the producers are trying to convey but completely disagrees with their stance. An illustrating example of this position happens when government attempts to enforce new regulations that economically affect population. The initial reaction would be rejection, despite all the presented by the government merits and benefits from the reform.

\textsuperscript{51} Lit: little girl manga.
In context of *Transit Girls* the oppositional stance towards the plot and the drama itself can be exemplified by previously mentioned negative criticism from LGBT persons.

**Character Portrayal**

Traces of gender stereotyping in *Transit Girls* can be observed in Saiyuri and Yui. Unlike heterosexual Mirai, who is an ordinary high-school girl and shown as modest and “girly”, Sayuri possesses colorful low voice and manners of a tom-boy. Sayuri appears to have more masculine features, both in her looks and in her behavioral patterns, in how she expresses herself, straight-forwardly and clumsily. Contrasting to her, Yui is elegant, quiet and feminine. She is driven by passion but seems to be prepared to sacrifice herself for the sake of the one she loves.

At the same time, multiple nuance of lesbian portrayal might appear unappealing to an ordinary viewer. Focus of queer representation in *Transit Girls* is excessively sex-oriented. Every episode contains either kissing or implied nudity, which is uncommon for ordinary love portrayal in Japanese romance TV series.

Upon closer inspection of Yui’s character, it becomes evident that it breeds negative associations around sexual minorities. Yui despite being portrayed beautiful, elegant and sensitive, appears to act with an air of a lightheaded young woman. The viewer learns that she has dropped out of college aiming to work as assistant to the photographer she was romantically involved with. She also thrushes her lesbian desire upon inexperienced and confused step-sister Sayuri without a hesitation.

Thereby, the portrayal of a sex-driven character differs from normal social behavior, proving heteronormativity as correct and homosexuality as wrong.

Differences in expressions of feelings is yet another important element that is representative for Japanese society. Whilst modern generation has become more open in public (hold hands, occasional kisses, cuddling), it would be inaccurate to assume that physical expression of closeness in public is a welcomed and desirable manner of behavior. When comparing the feeling expression between the heterosexual and the homosexual characters in *Transit Girls*, Yui and Sayuri’s love appears opposite to what is considered normal and accepted. For instance, Yui and Sayuri are physically drawn to
each other, which leads to numerous kisses, embracing each other, bathing together, sharing a bed, and even discussion about “how do girls do it”. While looking at heterosexual couples in the series, for example the girls’ parents, their affection is framed in a sophisticated way, without expression of public signs of affection which corresponds to social norms of behavior. Absence of attributes that imply desire, so generously present in the lesbian couple, create a particularly strong contrast to heterosexual love.

Other heterosexual characters, Sayuri’s school-friend Mirai, and childhood friend Nao, appear to become victims, who suffer because of the lesbian desire between protagonists. The complexity of the intertwined relationship between Nao, Mirai and Sayuri adds to the drama by showing happy love between Sayuri and Yui at the time when Nao and Mirai are suffering from broken hearts. Nao is in love with Sayuri and patiently awaits to confess his feelings which is followed by rejection, pain and disappointment. His character is portrayed as a hero, as he continues to support Sayuri, even when she comes out to him about her infatuation with her step-sister. Mirai, the school-friend of Sayuri, treasures romantic feelings for Nao, but gets rejected by him in favor of Sayuri. In this complex love triangle, Sayuri appears to act on basis of her own benefits, egoistically and ignorant towards her friends’ feelings. Even the friendship between Mirai, Saiyuri and Nao gets torn apart by, what appears to be, infatuation caused by the “wrong” relationship and obsession.

At first glance, the presence of shrine in the opening- and the final scenes can seem accidental. “Praying” and “shrine” can at the same time build strong associations, similar to the ones mentioned from example of Disneyland Wedding ceremony. By repeatedly bringing to attention that lesbian protagonist, alone or together with her partner, appear praying at the shrine, or visit graveyard this can be associated with asking for forgiveness. It also can be seen as demonstration of utopia with the homosexual relationship that seeks a non-humanly help to sustain its existence.

Additionally, the heteronormative society that is represented by the circle of Sayuri’s friends, acquaintances and family members appear in front of the viewer as understanding, sacrificing and helpful, taking the role of victims, while lesbian couple remains forgiven tolerated villains.
Criticism from Abroad

Erica Friedman, the president of Yuricon LCC for Social Media Without Delusion is one example how the drama is received by non-Japanese viewers. She is also a publisher of Yuricon, participant and lecturer at a number of American and London Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals, the contributor and reviewer of yuri manga and anime who works for Japanese literary magazines Eureka, Animerica, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and numerous media magazines all over the world.

Erica Friedman published her review on Transit Girls in the online magazine okazu.yuricon.com, where she shortly summarized the story and conclusively gave it the overall rating of 7/10, describing it generally as worth watching. When taking the series to pieces, Friedman appears critical about the storyline “[…] stories where people fall in love with the only other person in the house near their age it’s a lazy writing and a tiresome plot.”

Positive feature that Friedman sees with the Transit Girls is what she calls the complete lack of homophobia. It is expressed in conclusive episodes, namely in the positive and supportive stance towards the girls’ love from the other characters, family members and friends. Madoka’s reaction on discovering the relationship between the step-sisters can be read as “revolutionary”, as it is pictured in a realistic manner: the initial shock, confrontation, reasoning and eventual acceptance that seeks to provide moral support to the girls. Keigo, Sayuri’s father, is portrayed similarly, in accordance with the movie character’s personality, realistic, easy to relate to. Keigo expresses no visual signs of disturbance and astonishment when Madoka reveals to him the situation. Even the reaction of Saiyuri’s school-friends, Nao and Mirai, when she opens up to them, is unexpectedly calm. The conflict resolution can be seen, according to Friedman, as rather soft, natural, positive and heart-warming.

Friedman directs her negative criticism to the acting in kissing scenes, specifically mentioning the culmination of the series, when Sayuri closes her arms around Yui in the final moment. Friedman asserts that she was expecting the girls to

crown the movie ending with a passionate kiss, leaving an open but promising ending. She expresses her disappointment with the scene:

It looked kind of like if you asked two children to watch grown ups kiss, then kiss like them. They move back and forth, but the lips stay dry, pressed emotionlessly against each other. Totally put a harsh on what would have been a great moment otherwise.

Hall’s theory helps to critically evaluate, what can lay basis for the different reception of the drama, from viewer to viewer. Initially expected rejection of elements like love between step-sisters, excessive sex-drive and victimized family members appear to have been ignored by Japanese heterosexual reviewers. Criticism of lesbian portrayal is especially prominent from the members of LGBT community.

**Conclusion**

Political arena of contemporary Japanese society is currently shifting. Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP) under number of occasions explicitly expressed their opposition towards legal changes for LGBT- marriages. Nevertheless, the influence of external actors, like Olympic Committee and Human Rights Watch, along with processes of globalization and transcultural exchange, appear to function as force that drives progress in introducing diversity in Japanese Society.

Since 2013 the Japanese queer genders became hyper visible in media. This thesis investigated the quality and features behind the created hypervisibility of queer genders in mainstream media. This thesis has exemplified that in various circumstances, the achieved hypervisibility is prone to be framed in specific context which in fact reassures heteronormative views in society.

As it follows from case-study on example of *Transit Girls*, the angled context despite that series appears pro-lesbian, continues to reestablish heteronormativity as right and homosexuality as wrong. It also explicitly demonstrates the possibility of tolerance of homosexual unions as long as they are kept secret.
This thesis arrives at the conclusion that the creation of the lesbian-themed drama in 2015 was possible and well-received by the audience because it did not go against heterosexual societal norms. It presented the odd image of homosexuality, without attempting to normalize it as standard.

When analyzed side by side with heterosexual characters of the drama, heterosexual characters appear as strong contrast to homosexual ones. Lesbians Sayuri and Yui differ from the rest by being bizarre exclusion who are uncertain themselves about how to cope with their feelings. Their love is pictured as sensitive, passionate and romantic, but looking at the details embedded within the context, the girls are not suited as role models for the society to aspire. The producers of the series found rich use of elements of context manipulation by presenting background information framed in context of forbidden, lesbian even on marketing stage of the series, thereby preparing audience to interpret the protagonists and their actions as such. Furthermore, the stereotypical image of TV portrayal of queer genders that is similar to the one described in GLAAD report of 2016, shows the lesbian’s accent on sex, kissing and excessive nudity, which does not fit in the frames of typical socially acceptable behavior.

The lack of celebrities in Transit Girls can also be seen as illustrating factor of that shows that excessive influence was not expected from the drama. When reflecting upon the comments and reviews from Japanese forums and referring to criticism from abroad, this thesis arrives at the conclusion that Transit Girls was appreciated by the audience as form of entertainment, without challenging societal order of the contemporary Japanese society.

The further research on media coverage of lesbian and queer gender-related questions is an important aspect that can assist Japanese sexual minorities in advocating their right. Systematic and positive representation is a challenging task, but a worthy goal to aspire. When the needs of the society and the aspiration of political elites will intertwine they are likely to aid their common goal towards Japan’s more inclusive democratic future.
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