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**Social reproduction of male-centered hegemony in Japan
through Johnny & Associates and its idols**

Yuka Nakamura

CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|--|------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Methodology | 6 |
| Chapter I | |
| Literature Review | 8 |
| 1.1 Unmatured “Shonen” image of Johnny’s idols | |
| 1.2 Gender performance produced by Johnny’s idols | |
| 1.3 Affective economics | |
| 1.4 The structure of Japanese media industry, and Johnny’s jimusho | |
| Chapter II | |
| Interviews | 17 |
| 2.1 Intimacy produced by Johnny’s idols | |
| 2.2 What does make idols National (Kokumin-teki)? | |
| Conclusion | 23 |
| Bibliography | 26 |

Introduction

Johnny's idols, who are the most famous and magnificent celebrities in Japanese entertainment scenes, are only male. Even though there is a strong awareness of gender equality and the importance of diversity of identity in Japan, they are still supported by many audiences, and they are deemed as "mainstream" and even more, "*kokumin-teki* (national-like)." They are strong icons which are embodying and representing Japanese masculinity. However, they can also be said to be producing different concepts from general "mature male" images, as the structure of the relationship between their promotions, their fans, and expressions by media around them have intertwined with each other and this relational structure reinforces the hegemony of masculinity in Japan.

Johnny's idols are ubiquitous in Japan. We can see them on TV shows, in magazines in all bookstores, in advertisements in shops and on trains. The management company of them, Johnny & Associates, was established in 1975. The origin of this company dates back to 1962, when Johnny Kitagawa, who is often described as an eternal producer of Johnny's contents, produced a first idol group "Jani-zu (Johnny's)" (Shuto 2022, p. 140). Before Johnny Kitagawa died in 2019, almost all its idols were scouted and produced by him. All of them are trained as "Johnny's Jr" at first of their career for some years, and then they can have their CD debut as a professional "Johnny's idol." Currently, the company has 16 idol groups and manages more than 20 single talents (Johnny & Associates, 2022). Since the establishment of this company, Johnny's idols attract many fans. For example, Arashi, which debuted with the company in 1999, has become the most popular male idol group in Japan today, generating ¥14.4 billion (\$180 million) in CD and DVD sales in 2009 (Nagaike, 2012). Furthermore, recently, the idol group named Snow Man achieved millions of CD sales three times more since they debuted in 2020; despite being said to be an era when CDs cannot be sold such records of sales are in place of this music distribution. From such sales, and ubiquitous appearances it seems they are widely accepted by not only young women but also by

many men and women of older generations. Arashi even performed a celebrated song for the enthronement of the Japanese Reiwa emperor in 2019. This was both positively and negatively discussed in public and on social media; Arashi was for example being discussed in terms of being an ‘idol’ group, and therefore as not seeming professional enough for its singing performance to appear at such a national (*kokumin-teki*) ceremony. However, almost all media treated this as a positive event that, Arashi, which is regarded as the national Japanese representative idol group performed for the new emperor.

We have many chances to see them in our daily lives in Japan as they have strong access to Japanese media such as TV programs, magazines, radios, and many other media platforms. Recently, the company made a new strategy to push the idols to the broader media sphere by creating YouTube accounts. Some major groups such as Arashi, King & Prince, and Snow Man have their own accounts. There are also channels where Johnny’s idols appear beyond the boundaries of the group. It seems more flexible than before when they did not appear on any SNS media except their official sites and blog but also makes them even more ubiquitous and part of our everyday life. As a result of this new approach to get much more fans, almost all Japanese, not just fans, have the opportunity to unconsciously and unexpectedly see and know them, regardless of age or gender. The idols blend into the daily lives of many people.

From this point, it is significant to explore how and what kinds of gender and social value are adhered to by Johnny & Associates and what its idols represent. This thesis aims to explore the following key questions: What kind of gender performances are they producing? How do idols continue to affect and impact Japanese society? Moreover, what significant ideas and objects do idol fans push and recommend to others in support of their favorite idols, and why do fans and Japanese people seem to accept Johnny’s idols without much questioning? Considering these issues, I focus on exploring why Johnny’s idols, or even perhaps because of the strong masculine identity they themselves represent, they have such great degree of popularity in otherwise diverse Japan?

To explore these questions, firstly, I introduce performances of what they do as Johnny's idols and what gender values they promote and represent. In this section, I discuss how a young man becomes an iconic symbol as "Johnny's idol" with their special concept of identity as a '*shonen*'. Then I explore how the gender is socially constructed through using the theory of Judith Butler of gender performativity and the general ideas of gender classification in Japan, and also, how Johnny's idols are continuing their masculine identity within Japanese society. I then turn to explore the concept of "affective economics" in Japanese entertainment field, how familiarity and intimacy are important in consumption of 'soft power' culture such as that of Johnny's idol culture. Next, I explore the structure of Japanese media industry and how Johnny & Associates can have such strong impact, and how those structures contribute to maintaining a male-centered hegemony.

Furthermore, the most significant point, is how Johnny's idols' fans see Johnny's idols because without fans they would not be this impactful. In this part, I discuss the importance of "intimacy/familiarity" in the Japanese entertainment scene by exploring a multivocal word "*kawaii*", especially for the relationship between Johnny's idols and their fans. In addition, I explore what the term *kokumin-teki* actually is defined as in the context of the fans, which also emerged from my own first-hand research as a key point.

Importantly, there is a huge difference between Johnny's idols and other male idols in Japan. This is because a *jimusho* (production company) has special power and influence to construct the entertainment field itself. All their activities such as the way of media exposure and fan culture are totally different depending on a *jimusho*, so my claim about Johnny's idols may not apply completely to all Japanese male idols. However, I believe it is significant to explore how Johnny & Associates, which is one of the strongest *jimusho* in Japan and its idols are related to affecting the construction of a continuing male-centered hegemonic culture in Japan.

Methodology

Johnny's idols who are mainstream celebrities of Japan are only male. Those idols have a strong popularity nationwide mainly because of media exposure frequency, and they are usually called as "*kokumin-teki* (national)" given the sense that they are national treasures, or representatives of Japan. Through their performances and other kind of activities, it seems that they are representing general Japanese masculinity in society. However, they produce not only "mature man" images, but also a sense of androgynous '*shonen*' image. This thesis aims to explore the reproduction of the specific system of male-centered hegemony through the existence of Johnny's idols, and how those idols, their fans and mainstream media are intertwined and affect each other.

To explore this intertwinement, the thesis is can be said to be divided into two specific parts: The first part, Chapter I, I discuss the nature of idol culture, the jimusho, emotional capitalism with specific reference to idol culture and Johnny and Associates. Chapter I is based on a thorough literature review of relevant research on these topics, to understand the broader cultural, economic and social context of idol culture, and more specifically what kind of values and identities are being promoted. In Chapter II I explore through first-hand research in more in-depth the important role of fans' emotional attraction to the whole enterprise of idol culture and its broader impact on Japanese national identity and consumer culture.

I chose to conduct one-to-one in-depth ethnographic interviews during July to November 2022, with three people, two who are Japanese and one who is an international student from China but living in Japan. They are all female aged 21-22. The two Japanese are both fans of Johnny's idols for over 10 years. The Chinese student I interviewed also has developed a deep interest in Japanese gender relations, gender and media production, emotional capitalism and herself a fan of Japanese popular culture such as Japanese idols. Interviewees' names have all been changed to a pseudonym in this thesis to keep them anonymous. One of the interviewees, Haruko, is a student of Soka University, and she loves Arashi and Satoshi Ohno, who is a member

of the group, for over a decade. The other is also a university student in Japan, Yumi, and she was inspired by Arashi's live performance, and has been studying TV shooting techniques professionally at university. She has loved Arashi since she was around 10 years old, and nowadays she is becoming a fan of SixTONES which is also a Johnny's group debuted in 2020. The last, Chun is an international student of Soka University, and I interviewed her to also learn more about idol culture in China and compare it with Japanese idol culture in terms of how fans, idol culture and mainstream media intertwine.

I conducted multiple open-ended interviews which were more like everyday conversations as I had come to know the people interviewed through repeated interaction with them. By having more natural conversations, I could pay attention to their feelings and words as they talked about supporting their idols and relationship with fans on a daily basis thus giving me deeper insights into the affect and emotional aspects that are seen as central in "emotional capitalism". The words they produced reveal how they see the world of idols and how they are thinking about supporting a certain "boy/man" as an "idol" by deciding to spend some of their money and time. This kind of fan behavior is expressed in the word "*osu* (literally in English, push/recommend)" in Japanese idol culture context. In here, "*osu*" means to support their favorite idols, and to keep track their activities such as watching TV shows and buying magazines that the idols appear. To gain an exact nuance of their feelings, all interviews for Japanese interviewees were done in Japanese which is my and their mother tongue, and the interview for the international student was conducted in English. I wrote down their comments or remembered the contents of what interviewees shared and then wrote this down afterwards; this was often, while we had lunch together to make people feel this to be a more natural exchange without them feeling nervous and feeling any pressure of from the interviewers.

The results of various interviews/conversations reflect how fans observe and enjoy a world of Johnny's idols, and what kind of social/gender values they are accepting

through their fan activities. They indicate what important things are for becoming a popular idol in each society. They express their enthusiastic feelings for Johnny's idols by some special use of words such as "gappu (gap)" and "*kawaii* (cuteness)". Furthermore, they reveal a sense of intimacy which makes the "boys" become national (*kokumin-teki*) objects. Yumi expressed that an attractive point of these idol groups is the "gap between their performance as a proper 'Johnny's idol (even "when they do things like Johnny's idol")' and their supposedly true personality (in Japanese, *su*)". Fans can find such idols' behaviors that come to seem 'natural' in special media promoted content which is often named "behind the scenes" of CDs and live DVDs and some TV variety shows. This shows that in Japan they do not need to be 'a perfect man' but in fact is more relatable when seen not to be perfect behind the scenes; that is also the notion of what Chun indicates as an ideal image of a Chinese idol, they should be something like fans' family, or even they have to construct relationships with them that are seen through more 'personal' sphere through delusion in Japanese case. Furthermore, both Haruko and Yumi mention about their definition of "*kokumin-teki* (national)" as someone that become known, liked and popular among all-generations across the nation. A sense of familiarity and intimacy is also connected to the audiences' sense of "*kokumin-teki*"; I argue, however, that it is the idols' media exposure frequency and the way they are represented that is deeply related to constructing the audiences' feelings through which the idols then become "popular", and even a representation of the nation, produced through them as 'our' nation, i.e. the Japanese nation as cultural artifact of consumption.

Chapter I Literature Review

1.1 Unmatured "*Shonen*" image of Johnny's idols

Johnny's concept of 'male' is slightly different from social expectation of 'man' as 'mature masculinity.' Although Johnny's idols promote general concepts of gender and social values in Japan, they represent a kind of "new" images of masculinity.

Japanese hegemonic masculinity has centered on the image of “salaryman,” a figure that embodies “the notion of the Japanese male as the archetypal... husband/father and producer/provider” begins since the 1950s (Glasspool 2012, p. 114). Hidaka (2010, 3 cited in Glasspool 2012, p. 114) adds this general concept of gender roles in Japan that the male breadwinners work hard and faithfully for their companies, and the well-being of their families, whereas their wives do all the housekeeping and bear and raise children for the convenience of patriarchal and industrial capitalism.

Male idols, especially Johnny’s idols, look to contain and promote this dominant masculinity discourse through continuing embodiment of general Japanese social values in many ways. Firstly, Johnny’s idols respect a traditional relationship structure based on a hierarchical senior/junior (*senpai/kohai*) system (Glasspool 2012, p. 115). There is a custom of the company that Johnny’s Jr members provide backup dancers for senior idols on TV music shows and concerts. Secondly, some of the idols enjoy the benefits of male-centered hegemonic social structure of labor in Japan. As an example, Sho Sakurai, one of the members of idol group Arashi, achieved a degree in economics from the prestigious Keio University and a side job as a newscaster, and this return us to the adult salaryman model of masculinity and male-dominated professional domain and Japanese general concepts of gender that the dominance of men and subordination of women (Glasspool 2012, p. 116). Finally, Johnny’s idols are continuing Japanese general social value of groupism. Sugimoto (2020, p. 29) portrays having loyalty to a group is a primary value of Japanese and they also attach great importance to the maintenance of harmony within the group, which is called *wa* in Japanese. In the case of structures of Johnny’s idol groups, they deliberately promote themselves as members of a group (Nagaike 2012, p. 101). Each idol reveals different characteristics and kinds of attractiveness, through showing how he interacts with other group members in various situations, so that the unity of the group constructs the initial situation that subconsciously attracts female fans (Nagaike 2012, p. 101-102). Those several conventional social values are still brought by Johnny’s idols, and they are still in general patriarchal structures of society

that underpin the structures of the company as well.

On the other hand of those images of hegemonic masculinity against male idols, they also perform a new man concept like an “herbivore man”. The concept of herbivore men came from media panics surrounding the low birth and marriage rates in Japan (McLaren 2019, p. 345). The term *soshokukei-danshi* (herbivore men) was coined by journalist Fukasawa Maki in a 2006 Nikkei Business article, and it describes young heterosexual men who do not actively pursue women (McLaren 2019, p. 345). In other words, herbivore men have seemed like men who have absolutely no sexual desire are on the increase (Glasspool 2012, p. 118). Saladin (2017 cited in McLaren 2019, p. 345) indicates the general perception from that herbivore men are seen as not being ‘proper’ men, because they are said to lack assertiveness and ambition. However, in Johnny’s case, the representation of sensitive masculinity in idol media is carefully balanced with a display of interest in the opposite sex, which is reputedly lacking in the “herbivore man”, through public discussion of their ideal girlfriend or future wife, so that idols can continue their status of desirability (Glasspool 2012, p. 118). Nagaike (2012, p. 103) indicates an icon of Johnny’s idols by referring to them as ‘*shonen*(boys)’, who in the Japanese sociocultural context project a sense of androgyny. The word *shonen* appears in a group called Shonen-Tai, a program in which Johnny's Jr with names like “Shonen Club” appear, and their songs. The *shonen* identity cannot be considered on the same basis as that of a mature adult man, since the *shonen* is merely “progressing” toward integration as a man within the symbolic order of breadwinner masculinity seen as adulthood for men (*shakaijin*); thus, the ideology of *shonen* concerns an idealized gender synthesis that also transcends the binary distinction between men and women (Nagaike 2012, p. 104).

The concept of *shonen* thus also reveals female desire to fantasize and create idealized images of idols/shonen, and it suggests a similar attempt to transform them into fiction/fantasies rather than accept their real (male) identities (Nagaike 2012, p. 104). Because these idealized *shonen* images can be read as a reflection of a subconscious

female denial of the patriarchal, masculine male, consequently, female fans of Johnny's idols indirectly contribute to dismantling established Japanese gender formations (Nagaike 2012, p. 104). Therefore, Johnny's idols tend not to present themselves as sexual, and the fans also do not want them not to be sexual subjects but rather as shonen. Glasspool (2012, p. 119) tied up this *shonen* image and youngness of the idols and a category of *kawaii*. Johnny's fans usually express their love for their favorite idols as "*kawaii*" even if the idols are in their early 30s or older. Although this sense may also come from a high degree of intimacy like that for the family, Glasspool (2012, p. 119) indicates the attraction of this *kawaii* interpretation provides a "safer" form of masculinity. Because this safety feeling may be preferable to young girls' fantasy partners, as "safer objects of love" (Glasspool 2012, p. 119) rather than actually sexually engaged. Therefore, this emphasis on idol appearance as boyish, rather than the more adult "manly" may also have a positive function for the female audience (Glasspool 2012, p. 120), presuming that they are not attracted to the image of males as sexually active.

1.2 Gender performance produced by Johnny's idols

As discussed in the last section, we see in how a particular form for masculinity and its hegemonic status is still a strong concept for Japanese men in how to be a 'man' in Japan, and what is presented as desirable masculinity. Also, we see the degree to which Johnny's idols contain those general Japanese masculine identities and how they are different from the old salaryman type at the same time.

However, it is also clear how gender is socially constructed, and that gender is a social performance through which identity is formed. Gender encompasses a range of practices, assumptions, and expectations about what it means to be male and what it means to be female that reveal clearly how this is because humans are part of 'culture' rather than simply 'nature' (Ransome 2010, p. 270). The three influential accounts of gender: social embodiment, discourse, and performative discourse, draw on the basic idea of social construction as embodied (Ransome 2010, p. 270). Specifically, about the

performative discourse of gender, Butler concentrates on how gender plays out in actual situations and treats gender as a particular kind of discourse (Ransome 2010, p. 272). Butler sees gender (and biological sex) as instantiated or made real through 'performativity' (Ransome 2010, p. 272). Related to the concepts of *habitus* and *doxa*, which Pierre Bourdieu argued, once social actors have got into the habit of interacting with each other using the repertoire of gendered behavior it becomes very difficult if not impossible for them to interact without using such cultural schemas; in other words, the chance of behaving in a non-gendered way is lost (Ransome 2010, p. 272-273).

As an illustrative example in the context of Japan, the Takarazuka Revue provides only female performances, but the performers are divided into two roles 'male role' and 'female role' highlighting the performative aspect of ideal gender in Japan. In the Takarazuka case, female actresses who are in a 'female role' perform an extremely 'feminine' woman role such as utilizing codified feminine behaviors such as exaggerated mannerisms, vocalization, and visual cues (Luke 2016, p. 123). In a similar way, Johnny's idols perform their characteristic 'masculine' men. In their case, although they have their own specific tradition of 'masculinity' which contains an image of '*shonen*', there are tacit social expectations based on general Japanese masculinity of the salaryman and breadwinner type of hegemonic masculinity (Dasgupta 2013 cited in Holtzman 2018, p. 287).

While pictures of Johnny's idols are created by their producers as 'unmatured men (*mijuku na shonen*)', Johnny & Associates have a strategy to express its idols' masculine identity. For example, along with technological progress in stage audio equipment such as microphones, roller skating, wire action, abdominal drumming, and 4D flying have become established as expressions of the appeal of masculine identity of Johnny's idol groups (Shuto 2022, p. 171). Furthermore, Johnny's idols exhibit their masculine identity through participating or relating actively in sports. Not only they play sports such as basketball, baseball, and athletics as their performance for fans, but also, they frequently work as a sports commentator, navigator, and main caster for the

Olympics (Shuto 2022, p. 172). In those ways, while Johnny's idols have an identity as *shonen*, they perform masculine identity by showing their exercise capacity and active participation in sports-related work. They are continuing their hegemony as a male idol in a field of Japanese under the general social expectation that sports is particularly a male activity in that bodily strength is associated with hegemonic male ideals.

1.3 Affective economics

Johnny's idols can be seen to express a certain 'soft power' which produce certain emotions and desires, and make people, in this case their fans, to behave in a certain way subconsciously. People decide their purchase led by their desire, and especially in a field of soft or more precisely affective power, those decisions are building, developing, and maintaining relationships to shape desires (Jenkins 2006 cited in Galbraith 2019, p. 26). Galbraith (2019, p. 26-39) explores such "affective economics" with the prominent example of maid cafés in Akihabara Japan. The maid café is embodying interaction with fictional characters, who allow for imagining and relating to favorite characters (Galbraith 2019, p. 28). In the maid café, young women cosplay as maid to serve customers who is often called 'master' referring to male-female hierarchies. Each maid has their original setting and performs their character. As an important thing to think about in relation to the maid café is how it functions as a place to provide customers with an affective feeling of "*moe*", which is explained also as "two-dimensional love", where "two-dimensional" refers to the world and characters of manga and anime as opposed to the "three-dimensional" world of humans (Galbraith 2019, p. 27). The maid café can be called as a "*moe* space" (*moeru kukan*), and it is expressed as 2.5-dimensional space (*nitengo jigen kukan*) due to the cognition that "delusions become reality (*moso ga genjitsu-ka shita*)" (Inforest 2005 cited in Galbraith 2019, p. 27). *Otaku*, who can be also as a regular of the maid café, enjoy this affective world by straddling layered contexts, which are both fictional and real (Saito 2011 cited in Galbraith 2019, p. 35). This layered structure that serve as a "three-dimensional" person who are wrapped as a "character"

performs/provides customer affective emotion that can be said to function in similar ways to what the world of Johnny's idols is. Each Johnny's idol has their own character while they are performing for fans as their "true self" in 'behind the scenes' contexts. In other words, even if idols behave as their "true self", they become a "character" because of media structure and performing on stage as a "Johnny's idol" which is where the 'true' self is also constructed as a contrast.

Furthermore, McVeigh (2000, p. 225-245) explains such relationships in his original term 'consumutopia' and desire, and show how people act within a framework of unhindered/freedom/self-autonomy versus coercion/control/compulsion through an example of Hello Kitty. Consumption of materials related to Hello Kitty especially in Japan reflects how the purchasing and collecting practices of a group of people manufacture a massive field of desire, which is explained as pursuit of being cute, cool, feminine, ingroup status, nostalgia (McVeigh 2000, p. 227). McVeigh (2000) indicates why Hello Kitty has such a long-standing popularity among Japanese not only young girls but also adult women and even men. This is because Sanrio, the company that produced and provides Hello Kitty is balancing between a unifying leitmotif and product variety (McVeigh 2000, p. 235). To maintain this delicate balance administers a 'comsumutopia', where producers and manufacturers must try their hardest to keep at bay monotony, a sense of sameness, ennui, and satiation, while maintaining a unifying leitmotif of the product (McVeigh 2000, p. 235). Furthermore, McVeigh (2000, p. 235) adds that the ultimate aim of corporations is not to satisfy the wants of consumers but to instill dissatisfaction and incite desire. Johnny & Associates has a similar strategy of producing its idols. All of them were educated as a "Johnny's Jr" at first for some years, then they can debut as a professional "Johnny's idol". Through their training period, they cultivate a unified identity as a "Johnny's idol". On the other hand, they seek themselves of their original characteristic pursuits to become a new type or unique as a professional Johnny's idols. As a result, there are a lot of diverse idols but simultaneously unified as "Johnny's idols" who are active as actors in dramas, newscasters, comedians, and so on,

clearly visible even through a casual glance at Japanese television.

In the same way, a sense of familiarity and intimacy has a subconscious power to influence people's decisions also in the Japanese entertainment field as a field of emotional capitalism. In terms of gender, women generally watch more television than men (Karlin 2012, p. 77). This fact may come from the existence of many women who are housewives and have more time on their hands, and even a fixed concept that television viewers are mainly housewives. For those people, *koukando* (likeability) is an important concept for Japanese celebrities because people's (mainly housewives) number of hours of daily television viewing impresses celebrities into the routine of their everyday life, making them as recognizable and familiar as anyone in real life (Karlin 2012, p. 77-78). Mika Matsumoto (2007, p. 48-58 cited in Karlin 2012, p. 80) indicates especially about Johnny's idols that - Johnny's fans reject the view of the artificial or produced star image, and strongly insist upon knowing the true self of the idol, and "they don't have two sides (*ura omote ga nai*)". In this case, the audiences do not see the border of *tatema*e and *honne* structure of idols. Intimacy creates commercial benefits in many ways, and even more, desire from female fans of Johnny's idols is creating narratives which Nagaike (2012, p. 106) called pseudo-intimacy. Laura Mulvey (1989 cited in Nagaike 2012, p. 106) indicates the act of creating narratives enhances specific forms of desire. These "narratives of desire" is indispensable within a consumer-capitalist framework, and the desire is affected through the process of creating narratives, each of which increases the desire to produce more narratives (Nagaike 2012, p. 107).

1.4 The structure of Japanese media industry, and Johnny's *jimusho*

Johnny's idols are undeniably existing in the real world, but their communication form with fans is mostly through various media rather than direct ways such as conversations. Therefore, it is significant to explore the nature of the media and its structure in the context of Japan and especially Johnny's *jimusho*, which provides mainstream contents of Johnny's idols.

McLaren (2019, p. 347) indicates that misogyny permeates in mainstream Japanese media culture and such culture sustains the male-dominated media industry. Japanese media establish often troubling ways with culturally accepted notions of gender and deeply rooted patriarchal norms of femininities and masculinities (McLaren 2019, p. 340). Against those background, as mentioned earlier, for example, the term *soshokukei-danshi* (herbivore men) was treated and constructed as a shocking phenomenon in mainstream Japanese media field. Importantly, McLaren (2019, p. 346) argues, “this non-hegemonic masculinity is constructed as problematic because it undermines the hegemonic ideals of stable employment (Dasgupta 2013) and disrupts the ways in which work, and masculinity are heavily intertwined in Japan”. Furthermore, McLaren (2019, p. 346) introduces a drama with the image of herbivore men and explains how it provides the notion of a new positive form of masculinity in contemporary Japan that can evolve. This transformation/progress of masculinity helps to “counter fears of weak masculinity, women’s empowerment and the “unreproductive” LGBT community in media discourses on Japan’s demographic challenges” (McLaren 2019, p. 346).

In Johnny’s idol consumption, the agent (*jimusho*) has the power itself to push their idols on the surface of all kinds of media in many ways. Idols contain a certain social value themselves, and the Japanese *jimusho* (performer management companies) system supports, creates, and provides it in society. Hiroshi Aoyagi (2005 cited in Marx 2012, p. 36) portrays *jimusho* as creating performers from zero, full coordination of artistic content by company employees, long-term market planning, and demands to control all media content about the idol. Aoyagi (2005 cited in Marx 2012, p. 36) also shows that one idol manager even labeled his work “mass control (*taishu sosa*)” due to the ability to shape the zeitgeist through the popularity of its idols. Therefore, it can be said in the Japanese entertainment industry that *jimusho* has a significant responsibility to the content of the entertainment and its background values. Furthermore, the *jimusho* wield an enormous amount of power, with which they

dominate other institutions and influence overall decision-making processes (Marx 2012, p. 42). Basically, once a *jimusho* company got the power to push other entertainment companies, it can operate its talents freely in the field of Japanese entertainment and some related media, such as what kind of TV shows they appear and suppress scandal exposure. The vast audiences have a lot of opportunities to see and know about them, and concepts of what Johnny's idols are and the values that they are bringing into the society permeate as an implicit social value.

From the above, the structure of media in Japan has underlying essence of misogyny, and Johnny's *jimusho* survived in that environment, and is providing a certain social value by "manipulating the masses". Johnny's fans usually accept information from media in a way that the pictures of the idols are 'true', but actually, the idols are wrapped and modified with a certain social norm by media. As a result, fans can be said to be subconsciously manipulated by media and Johnny's *jimusho* by watching and touching contents of them repeatedly as their daily lifestyle of "osu" activities. To explore this furthermore empirically, to draw in the next chapter on first-hand observations, and in-depth ethnographic interviews.

Chapter II Interview

2.1 The intimacy produced by Johnny's idols

As discussed earlier, to survive and become popular in the entertainment field of Japan, it is essential for talents how familiar the audience is with them through their activities, messages, and performances. This sense of intimacy seems quite important especially in Japan compared to some other countries, for example, China. Chun, one of my interviewees who is from China, point to what types of men can become an idol/talent and famous in Chinese society. The ideal image of a popular person, no matter whether they are men and women, is being a 'perfect' man/woman. Besides having to have perfect appearance in terms of the standard of beauty set in China, they also need to have good personality such as be seen to want to do voluntary work in the community or donate

money to charities, and even their thoughts need to show they are pure and sincere and have an ability to take action as gentlemen; in short, they need to fulfill the ideals of perfect behavior as specified in the Chinese context. ‘Good’ here refers to this idealized aesthetics that have been commercially produced as attractive characteristics by the company, developing a specific idol culture in China. By fulfilling the audiences’ constructed aspirations in this way, Chinese idols can become popular within this context in China. On the other hand, in Japan, the notion of the perfect man/woman does not have the same importance as in China; having for example perfect appearance are not considered significant for talents, especially Johnny’s idols. Instead, shown by Shuto (2022, p. 153) early Johnny’s idols produced by Johnny Kitagawa sold amateurism rather than perfectionism. Johnny Kitagawa believed that amateurs have advantages that professionals do not have (Shuto 2022, p. 153), and consequently, this reflects his construction the image of “unmatured” man, *shonen*, as a fundamental unified identity of Johnny’s idols. Thus, the boy-image is a central point of attraction to fans, and the way intimacy is constructed and sold. So how is this intimacy created for fans?

This relates closely to the relationship between amateurism and increasing the feelings of intimacy and this strongly appears in the fans’ psychology of “*osu* (pushing/supporting)” Johnny’s idols. I always start my ‘interviews’ with an opening question, knowing my interlocuters already have talked to me about this in various ways: “what do you like about Johnny’s?”, I ask. The two Japanese interlocuters answered, “Definitely, it is the ‘gappu’ (gap).” One of them, Yumi, explained her feeling that the ‘gap’ refers to the difference between idols’ self when they are performing, or behaving as a “Johnny’s idol”, and when they are ‘natural’ (in Japanese term, *su*). Even more, she expressed this sense as “they are doing like Johnny’s idol (jani-zu siteiru)”.

This sense of “gap” brings out the notion or feeling of “*kawaii* (cuteness)”. As I discussed on the last chapter, *kawaii* is here interpreted as a ‘safer’ form of masculinity, and Johnny’s fans feel attracted not to idols’ adult “manly” identity but their more boyish one (Glasspool 2012, p. 119-120). However, “*kawaii*” actually contains many different

meanings in the context of Johnny's fan culture. Haruko mentioned she feels *kawaii* when seeing this gap. She explains, "when they are performing as an 'idol' on stage, they are existing apart from us. But on variety shows, they are close to us like side by side." In other words, despite their cool, great, or almost perfect performance on stage, their mistakes or funny aspects in variety shows on TV for example, closes the psychological distance between them and Japanese audiences. This sense of distance when they are performing and audiences' expectation that idols/talents should be 'perfect' then creates a strong sense of intimacy when they then later are felt to be non-perfect humans, and more like 'us'. The term "*kawaii*" in this context captures this created familiarity and intimacy.

Furthermore, a significant point to explore then becomes what "*kawaii*" means in Johnny's fans context, and why/if they do not see idols simply as sexualized objects. My interviewees have feelings of strong intimacy with Johnny's idols as a kind of close friend or even family member; if the interviewees were to see them as a boyfriend or husband, this would create and keep a sense of distance rather than closeness. Attraction is in this way based both on a certain kind of intimacy and distance, which keeps them exotic and thereby attractive, but not through imagining them as sexually intimate. The attraction is constructed by the fact that they are not presented as sexually active. Haruko expressed that she slightly feels like she is a mother of idols, in the sense of watching over their activities. She adds the feeling is like that she has to do something for them. In this way, "*kawaii*" can contain feeling of love from a motherly gaze.

At the same time, the feeling of being also an exotic 'boyfriend' needs to maintain but at a certain distance. So, for example, Haruko says her complex feelings about the opening YouTube account of Arashi, which is a group she has been supporting for a long time. When the account was opened, she felt discomfort because Arashi comes in a freer form by YouTube than existing media such as TV, making them too available. Arashi became too close to her lifestyle, so she wanted to have some more distance from them. Nowadays, she no longer feels uncomfortable about it, but she mentions that it is just

right for her that Arashi exists between reality and fiction psychologically. From her experience, it can be said that although the existence of an idol is real, the fan transforms an idol into a fictional character through various layers of media. Interestingly, it does not mean she dislikes the idols, but because she has enthusiastic love for Arashi as kind of 'fictional' Johnny's idols.

However, I also found that the usage of the word "*kawaii*" depends on the person. Importantly, the sense of *kawaii* must be treated with cautious as not all fans see Johnny's idols as sexual objects at all as already mentioned in the same way that girl idols are objectified as sexual objects through being *kawaii* schoolgirls (Dent-Spargo 2017). For instance, Haruko mentions about her friend aged 22 who is a fan of King & Prince, a Johnny's idol group of five people aged 23 to 27. The friend says she hesitates to say to real her boyfriend that she likes King & Prince because she is afraid that he will mistakenly think that she is really in love with idols due to closeness in age and therefore would feel more like a competition for her boyfriend of the same age, under the general expectations of Japanese people that it is 'normal' to fall in love with the opposite sex of the same age. Thus she would not describe them as *kawaii* in front of her boyfriend.

Moreover, it is also significant to explore about a sense of intimacy of fans, how Johnny's fans react when they see idols have love scandal. Haruko, recalls her feeling when she knew about the marriage of Kazunari Ninomiya who is a member of Arashi. She was shocked about the news. This is because she does not like his wife, Ayako Ito who was a TV announcer; this is because Ito implied having dated Ninomiya several times before the announcement of their marriage. However, she could regain her love for Arashi by feeling the impressive live performance of Arashi even after he got married. On the other hand, after Sho Sakurai and Masaki Aiba, members of Arashi each got married in 2021, Haruko said she could accept those 'incidents', and she thinks it is a good thing that the idols she supports are happy.

This reaction of Johnny's idols' fans shows a crucial difference from the example of AKB48 members, where as shown by Dent-Spargo (2017, p. 183-223) male fans could

not tolerate having the fantasy of the young virgin-girl image broken by discovering their idol had a real-life boyfriend. In a case of AKB48, male viewers' desire of AKB48 idols as *shōjo*, or young girls, alternate between erotic and emotional attachment where the *shōjo* must appear innocent, but sexually available at the same time (Dent-Spargo 2017, p. 208). This fact also reveals tacit gender norms 'purity' or 'innocence' for female/girls as sexual objects, a long-standing Japanese sexual fetish. One of my interviewees, Haruko, points out that by contrast there are no rule to prohibit to have a lover for Johnny's idols, but AKB48 and other female idol groups have such strict rules due to the centrality of the 'pure' and 'unspoilt' young girl whereby the male fans become the supposedly significant person in the idol's life. The images of both *shonen* and *shōjo* concepts kind of 'unmatured' man/woman, but fans pursue idols with different desires and imaginations as to whether they are regarded as sexual objects or not; they are both objects of consumption and emotional capitalism, but in different ways according to particular gender norms that are being reproduced through idol gendered performativity as proposed by Butler.

Unlike the cases of marriage of Arashi's members, it is also true that among Johnny's idols, there are many talents who have left the Johnny's *jimusho* after being denounced by their love scandals. This fact may reveal how important for Johnny's idols it is to also have a balance of sexual and *shonen* image of androgyny, between their own life and performing masculinity, and non-sexual identity, whereby a *shonen* and idol man is loved by everyone. In this way, there are complex frameworks to see Johnny's idols as non-sexualized objects by using the word "*kawaii*", and there are many types of reactions of fans to see idols as both sexual objects, or boyfriend-like objects, and androgenous figures that play into each other in terms of feelings of distance and closeness.

2.2 What makes idols National (*Kokumin-teki*)?

As I indicate in the Introduction, Johnny's idols are usually described as "national" (*kokumin-teki*). What does the notion of *kokumin-teki* then mean in this

context? Also, what kind of elements would be acceptable to the general public or even a group of people in line with such notions of *kokumin-teki*? All my Japanese interviewees answered that they never thought about the reason why they are national representative. Also, they indicated that being ‘national’ equals being acceptable to all-generations, known and liked talents across the nation. Moreover, intimacy and familiarity are fundamental points in terms of being/becoming *kokumin-teki*. At the same time, being known to all-generations also indicate that Johnny’s idols have numerous media exposure. According to Marx (2012, p. 46), talents who appear on variety shows on a constant basis are the ones broadly understood to be “popular” in Japan. From my interviews, it seems that their fans are aware of this through their supporting activity for idols. Both Haruko and Yumi mention the notion of a “frame of Johnny’s idols (janizu waku)”, a special time slot set aside in many Japanese TV shows for Johnny’s idols. It means Johnny’s idols are treated as special contents in a TV program.

For instance, “The Music Day”, which is a song performing program of Nippon Television Network airs the songs of the Johnny’s group every year under the title of “Johnny’s Shuffle Medley”, in which group members shuffle and sing together as its special project (Nippon Television, 2022). Furthermore, in the “Red and White Singing Contest (*Kohaku uta gassen*)”, which is one of the biggest song programs of the national broadcaster NHK, Johnny’s idols have been appointed as MCs many times in the past. Those special treatments of each TV station naturally create numerous opportunities to see and know about Johnny’s idols. This actually happened to my interviewees. When I asked Haruko about her first meeting with a Johnny’s idol, she says that she coincidentally saw a TV drama named “Boys Over Flowers (*hana yori dango*)”. Then she knew Jun Matsumoto, a member of Arashi was a main character of the drama, and she gradually started to listen to music of Arashi and came to like them through watching dramas that they appeared in, and through their variety shows.

As discussed earlier, this frequency of media exposure is caused by the structure of Japanese entertainment field and the power of Johnny’s *jimusho*. Furthermore,

recently, the frequency increase more and more due to spread of new communication technologies such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and some other social media platforms called SNS. Surprisingly, Johnny & Associates tended to suppress exposure in such SNS sphere previously, but after Arashi announced to cease their activity in 2019, Arashi subsequently opened their own YouTube account, and after this, many Johnny's groups and units opened their accounts one after another. Yumi describes this alteration of strategy of Johnny's *jimusho* because those technologies penetrate our daily lifestyle, increasing the many chances to see and know about Johnny's idols even more, and as a lot of young Japanese in particular have stopped watching TV. In this way, Johnny & Associates increasingly creates opportunities to make people know and start to like and support its idols.

Conclusion

This thesis tried to explore how Johnny's idols, who are only male, provide gendered social values, change and persistence of a general concept of masculinity, and the way this continues to produce a male-centered hegemony in Japan through activities in the Japanese media. As a conclusion, Johnny & Associates and its idols are reproducing male-centered hegemony in Japan through the complex and ubiquitous interaction with its fans and Japanese media industry.

Johnny's idols bring the audiences general concepts of Japanese masculinity based on the image of the "salaryman" expressed through such notions of hierarchical senior/junior relationships, encouraging an academic background to get an important job in society, and the idea of individuals as fulfilling their purpose when they contribute to maintain 'harmony' within certain standards of group and gender relations. Although gender is a performance of humans to display and be a 'proper' man or woman, Johnny's idols also 'perform' their masculine identity by mainly showing their physical ability and getting involved with sports. At the same time, while they perform such Japanese conventional masculinity, they provide an unmaturing 'shonen' image of androgyny. This

sense of ‘unmatured’ males gives audiences a sense of familiarity and intimacy, and it contributes to gaining popularity amongst Japanese people who relate to such sensibilities. Such creation of strong intimacy results in more consumption of the audience of the product of idols. The affective power of emotional attachment also seen in maid cafés, Hello Kitty, or Johnny’s idols, even if in different ways, can be said to affect economic growth in Japanese society. At the same time, such consumption, or “affective consumption” is supported by the power of ‘affect’ in influencing desires, objectification and decision-making at least in terms of purchases.

From the interviews and many conversations, I learned that this sense of intimacy is a fundamental attraction of idols. Intimacy is derived from the “gap” constructed between idols’ performance on stage which is seen as ‘perfect/proper’ as a “Johnny’s idol” and the ‘natural’ behavior of stage when idols are in variety shows or seen acting “behind the scenes”. This thesis also revealed that the definition of the term “*kawaii*”, or cute, relates to the nature of the intimacy, what it means to the fans who do not see the idols simply as distant sexual objects but as their family and friend. On the other hand, Japanese media industry contributes to construct and maintain male-centered hegemony in Japan. Thanks to Johnny’s *jimusho*, which has a strong impact on Japanese media field, its idols have numerous accesses to many media platforms. Consequently, they can create many opportunities for Japanese audience to know and like them through appearing frequently in the media. This fact is also connected to a sense of “*kokumin-teki*” that people subconsciously assume when they see something over and over again in the media, which then become ‘our’ representative. In terms of Japanese entertainment industry, *Jimusho* takes full responsibility of its talents and for what kind of message it sends out, in other words the kind of social values of a male-centric Japanese culture that is represented as natural, but which in reality is closer to “mass manipulation” by *jimusho* and the media culture of Japan.

Japanese people, and especially Johnny’s fans, can be said to be manipulated probably at least partly subconsciously by Johnny’s *jimusho* that works as the structure

of Japanese media industry; because of their strategies to push its idols more and more in media platforms they become ubiquitous. However, actually, Johnny's idols itself has not only unmatured *shonen* image, but also general Japanese sense of masculine male breadwinner social value that they are also expected to eventually be performing, thereby supporting a continued male-centered hegemony structure that makes 'Japanese' public culture. Therefore, the company and idols, fans, and media are intertwined and strengthen the male-centered hegemony of Japan. They are pursuing gender social order mutually in highly manipulative ways through being able to draw in consumers as participants in the idol world of fantasies about intimacy, familiarity, and *kokumin-teki* sense of participation.

Currently, Johnny & Associates seems to try to appeal to Japanese audiences by having its idols appear more diverse. For example, the *Jimusho* consciously began to bring in one or two 'ha-fu (half) talents' per group for mainly Johnny's new generations, such as Snow Man and SIXTONES. These half idols show off their 'new' identities without any hesitation but with their strong confidence that they are not like 'conventional' Johnny's idols. Furthermore, there is also a big change in the clothes they wear on stage, for instance, Naniwa Danshi, which is a group debuted in 2021, performed with all in pale bright pink shirts and pants in the official music video of their first song "ubu-rabu (literally first love in English)" (Naniwa Danshi, 2021). It seems that the concept of masculinity is changed in a certain way where they seem to pay more attention to love. However, this is not to say that it weakens the power of the masculine identity of the idols and continue to stress the male-centered hegemony of Japan. Those kinds of 'new' images of Johnny's idols is also their "performance" to create new types of masculinity but nevertheless not one that strays from the breadwinner type. Yumi, one of my interviewees, explains this "Definitely they are "Johnny's idols", but they are not like "Johnny's idols" (in Japanese, *jani-zu rashiku nai*)." Also, Haruko suggests Johnny's idols still have power as idols even if they are not following always the line of hegemonic masculinity, while when female idols deviate from their expected performance of

femininity, they always lose their power as idols. Therefore, because of these gendered expectations, Johnny's idols can still be positioned as mainstream "*kokumin-teki*"; even with performing their 'new' masculine identity they continue to construct a sense that a male dominated society is 'normal' within Japanese society.

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