UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Exploring gender roles in contemporary Japan through the television show *Nigeru wa haji*

Master's thesis

MDP in East Asian Studies

Faculty of Social Sciences

Author(s):

Rachel Kaji

29/01/2025

University of Turku

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Master's thesis

Subject: MDP in East Asian Studies

Author(s): Rachel Kaji

Title: Exploring gender roles in contemporary Japan through the television show *Nigeru wa haji*

Supervisor(s): Yoko Demelius

Number of pages: 109 pages

Date: 29/01/2025

This thesis examines the popular Japanese television show *Nigeru wa haji* as a lens for exploring gender roles in contemporary Japanese society, particularly in relation to marriage dynamics, societal expectations, and work-life balance from a post-feminist perspective. The research questions guiding this study are: How did the audience react to the show, and what insights do these reactions offer about the portrayal of social issues in Japan today? What elements of post-feminism are present within the drama? Additionally, how does cultivation theory reinforce post-feminist themes?

To analyse the drama episodes as well as the social media audience comments, I used Braun and Clarkes (2006) thematic analysis. This method of thematic analysis consists of six phases: the first phase consists of familiarizing oneself with the data; the second phase consists of generating initial codes and the remaining phases include searching, reviewing, defining and naming themes.

Throughout my thesis, I argue that reaction from viewers on social media demonstrates an awareness of how media can both depict and perpetuate societal inequalities. I also argue that the drama's portrayal of marriage and domesticity can be seen as reinforcing traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms, despite its depiction of the protagonist's agency and independence. Thus, this television drama aligns with the idea of post-feminism as a form of antifeminism, where feminist politics are dismantled under the guise of acknowledging them, ultimately perpetuating gender inequalities and reinstating patriarchal standards.

Keywords: gender roles, thematic analysis, post-feminism, work-life balance, marriage and family dynamics

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The importance of studying *Nigeru wa haji*

Nigeru wa haji daga yaku ni tatsu (henceforth, *Nigeru wa haji*) is a Japanese television drama that originally ran on the Japanese TV channel TBS between October 11, 2016, and December 20, 2016. I decided to choose this drama to explore contemporary Japanese society, especially regarding marriage dynamics, societal expectations, and work-life balance through a post-feminist perspective because of the "mainstream" quality of this drama and the popularity it achieved amongst Japanese of all ages. Although this television drama can appear at first sight as a light-hearted, humorous drama without a great deal of consequence, it deals with surprisingly real social issues present in contemporary Japanese society, including the following questions: Is housework inferior to labour in companies? How should the burden of housework be divided among partners? Is the view of marriage that is not bound by the conventional marriage system unacceptable? Do women lose value as they age? These questions and issues have been frequently debated when the drama was released, but also in today's Reiwa era (令和）[1] . In particular, the traditional idea that "men work, and women stay at home" is still deeply rooted in Japanese society. In the drama, "escaping" is seen as something positive and can be considered useful in certain situations. For example, running away or escaping can be seen as useful when characters find themselves in difficult situations, such as unfulfilling careers, bad relationships, or feeling stifled by societal expectations. By breaking free from these circumstances, the characters can pursue happiness and personal fulfilment even though they may temporarily feel ashamed or uncertain if their choice was the right one. "Running away is shameful but useful" ("Szégyen a futás, de hasznos",) is the title of the original Japanese romance manga written and illustrated by Tsunami Umino[2] means that it is okay to run away even if it is embarrassing to do so.

Thus, studying the drama *Nigeru wa haji* is especially important to understand and analyse the portrayal of contemporary Japan in popular media. This drama offers valuable insights into

[1] Reiwa (in Japanese 令和）is the current and 232nd era of the official calendar of Japan. Reiwa era began on 1 May 2019, the day on which Naruhito, Emperor Akihito's son, became the 126th Emperor of Japan, thus marking the end of the Heisei era. "Reiwa" (令和） means "beautiful harmony" (Ministry of Foreign affairs).

[2] Nigeru wa haji (逃げるは恥だが役に立つ）is originally a Japanese romance manga series that was written and illustrated by Tsunami Umino. Published by Kodansha, it was serialized in the magazine *Kiss* from November 9, 2012. In total, the series consists of 11 volumes. The title of the manga is from the Hungarian proverb, *szégyen a futás, de hasznos.* In English, the drama is known as "We Married as a Job!"

various aspects of Japanese society, investigating the challenges, dynamics, and cultural norms that shape individuals' lives. By examining this drama, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and gender issues that exist in Japan and to study how they are represented in popular culture.

Furthermore, the drama's popularity and critical acclaim demonstrate the fact that it struck a chord with its audience. It has sparked conversations and captured the attention of viewers, which makes it a significant cultural phenomenon. By exploring the drama's impact and reception, it allows us to examine how it connects with the experiences, aspirations, and concerns of its audience, thus shedding light on larger societal issues and the role of media in shaping public discourse.

1.2 Research questions

The research aims to address the following three specific research questions:

1. How did the audience react to the show, and what does this tell us about the portrayal of contemporary social issues in Japan?
2. What elements of post-feminism are present in the television drama?
3. How does cultivation theory serve to reinforce post-feminism?

These research questions guide the analysis of the drama and will provide a focused and answerable framework to analyse the drama’s themes and representations. Through a detailed analysis of the drama, I will attempt to answer these questions as well as show how the drama portrays and discusses gender dynamics in contemporary Japan and represents gender-related social issues and challenges. I also discuss how audience comments on social media show media are both capable of depicting and reinforcing societal inequalities.

1.3 Scope and limitations

This study analyses the portrayal of contemporary Japan in the drama *Nigeru wa haji* and its relevance to larger issues in Japanese society, but more importantly it focuses on the social reactions to the drama and the representation of gender dynamics. The analysis mainly focuses on themes such as gender roles and expectations, marriage and career choices, work-life balance, and gender discrimination.

However, I am aware of the importance of acknowledging the limitations of this study. The analysis is based on the content of a single drama and will of course not be able to capture the full scope of Japanese society. The drama itself is a fictionalized version of reality, and its

portrayal may not take into account all aspects of contemporary Japan. In addition, the study relies on available data from social media posts, comments, and blog entries, which may not be an accurate representation of the perspectives and reactions of all viewers.

Another major limitation to my study is the fact that my study relies on available data from social media posts and comments to examine and understand the audiences' reactions. However, these sources may not be able to provide a broad representation of viewer perspectives, as they only represent the thoughts and opinions of some of the population. Also, the interpretations of these comments are in part influenced by the researcher's subjective judgement who may not fully capture what the viewer truly wants to express.

In addition, regarding Research question 2, to identify post-feminist elements within the drama, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of feminist theory and media analysis. However, because interpretations may vary, as well as the subjectivity of identifying post-feminist elements within a fictional piece of work, the study's findings may be limited. Furthermore, the main limit to the third research question, “how does cultivation theory serve to reinforce post-feminism?” is the fact that it may be challenging to apply cultivation theory to post-feminist themes within the fictional drama.

Furthermore, this study does not examine the production process or the representation of the drama in media channels. The research primarily focuses on the content of the drama and its reception among critics and audiences, as well as its implications for understanding contemporary Japanese society.

By acknowledging and taking account of the limitations of my study, it will ensure transparency in my research as well as allow me to interpret the findings more accurately.

2 BACKGROUND OF THE DRAMA

The Full-Time wife Escapist, also known as 逃げるは恥だが役に立つ(*Nigeru wa haji*) is a Japanese television drama that originally ran on the Japanese TV channel TBS between October 11, 2016, and December 20, 2016. The drama gained significant attention and positive reception both among audiences and critics during its original broadcast. It garnered high ratings and generated widespread discussion for its engaging storyline, relatable characters, and thoughtful exploration of contemporary social issues. The theme song (恋) of the television drama, composed by the male lead himself (Gen Hoshino), and to which the actors dance to (恋ダンス), became a social phenomenon. The music video for this song has been viewed over 200 million times on YouTube. The television show is an adaptation of the Japanese romance josei manga series that was written as well as illustrated by Tsunami Umino. It was released by Kodansha, with eleven volumes distributed over the course of the entire series and has been serialised in *Kiss* magazine starting November 9, 2012. The phrase "Running away is disgraceful, but useful" (szégyen a futás, de hasznos, Hungarian pronunciation: [sen fut dhsno]) is the source of the original title.

The drama is set in the lively metropolitan city of Yokohama. The female lead and male lead are played respectively by Yui Aragaki and Gen Hoshino, two very popular actors in Japan. The main female character is a 25-year-old unmarried woman who holds a master's degree in arts. After experiencing the struggles of looking for stable employment (就職活動=shuukatsu katsudou), she finally decides to become a temporary employee (派遣社員= hakenshain). However, once her contract ends, she finds herself once again jobless and accepts to become the housekeeper of her father's business partner, Tsuzaki Hiramasa, a system engineer in his mid-thirties. The two characters agree to sign a marriage contract (契約結婚=keiyaku kekkon) in which Mikuri works for Tsuzaki as his housekeeper, however, they end up falling in love.

2.1 The importance of studying television dramas

Japanese TV dramas as a reflection of contemporary social issues?

Public and commercial broadcasters exist in Japan, with Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, (Japan Broadcasting Corporation; NHK) serving as the public broadcaster. Despite NHKs formal independence from the government, NHK is publicly owned, and its revenue is generated through viewer subscription fees, which must be paid by everyone who owns a TV in Japan under the broadcast Law of Japan. Most the nation’s smaller networks are connected to one of

the five main commercial networks, which are Fuji TV, Nippon TV (NTV), Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), TV Asahi, and TV Tokyo. These terrestrial networks primarily air domestic content, and Lukács argues that serialized television dramas, which have "been the backbone of primetime entertainment throughout the postwar period", are responsible for this "self-contained televisual culture" (2010, 33).

All corporate networks rely on advertising to generate profits, and companies sponsor the dramas they air. This reveals that, to ensure financial viability, commercial networks are more concerned about viewer ratings than NHK. In recent years, Fuji TV in particular has had difficulty maintaining its viewership, with some of their most recent dramas averaging under 5%. In fact, Fuji TV produced all five of the lowest-rated dramas that were aired in 2017. This is a huge contrast to the broadcaster's past success, when it produced a number of highly successful dramas like "Tokyo Love Story" (1991) and "Hero" in 2001 (Excite News 2017).

Japanese TV dramas (terebi dorama) usually air every week for around 10 to 12 episodes. They tend to cover current topics that are being debated and discussed in Japanese society (Gössmann, H. M., 2015), this gives viewers the opportunity to connect with and understand contemporary discourses (Scherer, E. & Thelen, T, 2020). TV dramas tend to discuss issues that are seen as social problems (Painter, 1993), however, as the main aim of the broadcasting stations is to generate profits (Scherer, E. & Thelen, T., 2020), they cannot be overly critical (Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum, 2015). TV dramas cannot be viewed as a reflection of society or as a way to give advice to individual viewers, therefore they are unlikely to directly result in social change (Hu, 2005). However, according to Kelly Hu, who refers to Anthony's concept of self-reflexivity (Hu, 2005) TV dramas can help its audience to make choices about their lives: "Individuals will ask themselves questions about everything from lifestyles and relationships to body image and self-therapy. Japanese TV dramas present a multitude of similar questions with choices acted out for the viewers." (Hu, 2005)

2.2 Adaptations and remakes in the Japanese drama industry

Adaptations and remakes have become an important part of the Japanese Drama industry. Intermedial Adaptation is at the heart of Japanese Popular Visual culture. The core of the system of Intermedial adaptations is the manga-anime-live action film network, which Beáta Pusztai refers to as the "adaptational triangle." The tendency of manga being adapted into television and video anime series was founded by Osamu Tezuka and his show Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atom) aired in 1963, an important pioneer of "terebi anime" (television cartoon). A few other examples of comics being turned into anime and then live-action film, or series

include Paradise kiss (Ai Yazawa, 1999-2003), Gokusen (Kozueko Morimoto, 2000-2007), and Death Note (Tsugumi Oba-Takeshi Obata, 2003-2006). Beáta Pusztai suggests that there are various factors that explain why this so-called “adaptational triangle” is made possible. firstly, the fact that the manga (Sugimoto 2014), animation (Norris 2009) and film industries (Kakeo et al, 2010) are so widely developed in Japan means that the market is not dominated by only one visual medium: this tends to encourage the different industries to compete and cooperate with each other. In addition, the fact that each medium already has a large body of existing content also serves to motivate intermedial adaptation. In other words, the abundance of existing material provides a range of already existing characters and stories that can be reused and adapted to different media formats and meet the desires of diverse audiences. Secondly, intermedial adaptations are made possible by the self-sufficient and self-reliant so-called “production committees" (seisaku-iinkai). These production committees are of a temporary nature and are formed by various companies from different fields, the production company being at its core. Thirdly, in Japan, the notion of “originality” differs from the contemporary “Western” concept. Imitation is a fundamental element of Japanese traditional arts such as tea ceremony (sadou), pottery and flower arrangement (Ikebana). Imitation in Japanese traditional arts, of adaptations and remakes in the popular culture industry, holds no less value just because it derives from another piece of art: it is considered to have equal artistic value. Finally, intermediality, which refers to the interaction between various forms of media, is important in shaping national identity and dealing with concepts like “East and West,” or “tradition versus modernity” (Cavallaro 2013). Blending different forms of media together is a way to make something seem more authentic and rooted in Japanese history. This strategy has been used to make foreign influences appear more Japanese over time (Pusztai, 2015).

Nigeru wa haji is an excellent example of a successful adaptation. It was originally a manga series written by Tsunami Umino, and it was adapted into a live-action television drama in Japan in 2016 and went on to become a cultural phenomenon.

Although I will go into more detail about the drama further on in my thesis, I will provide a brief summary of the drama. The story revolves around a young woman named Mikuri Moriyama, who finds herself without employment and struggling to make a living. Mikuri ends up entering into a contract marriage with a man named Hiramasa Tsuzaki, who is looking for a wife in order to fulfil certain family expectations. The arrangement allows Mikuri to have a job and a place to reside, while Hiramasa benefits from having a wife to present to his family and colleagues.

The success of *Nigeru wa haji* can be attributed to several key factors:

Firstly, the fact that the storyline was very engaging and enjoyable for the audience: The adaptation stayed true to the manga's compelling storyline, which revolves around Mikuri Moriyama, a young woman who enters into a "contract marriage" with a freelance writer, Hiramasa Tsuzaki, to escape her unfulfilling job situation. The story looks into their evolving relationship, the challenges they face, and the comedic situations that arise. The humour that was very present throughout the entire show was greatly appreciated by its audience.

Secondly, the success of the drama can be attributed to the fact that the characters were very well developed: The characters in *Nigeru wa haji* are relatable and endearing, which captured the heart of the audience. For example, the way in which Mikuri's aunt, 49-year-old career women (Yuri Tsuchiya) is treated, reflects the fact that traditional views on marriage and women are deeply rooted in Japanese society; single women passed a certain age are still viewed as somewhat "abnormal" in Japan. (Takahashi Kouzuki, 2016). It seems that one of the reasons why the drama was so overwhelmingly popular was because the audience can relate to the struggles that the characters face:

> そして、ここまで書いてきたように、この登場人物たちの営みは、私たちにとって「人ごと」ではない社会の空気とともにある。だからこそ『逃げ恥』は、これほどに見る者の共鳴を呼ぶ作品になったのだ。（ライター・香月孝史）
>
> And, as I have written, the struggles of these characters are not only other people's concerns but are part of society. That is why "Runaway Shame" has become a work that resonates with viewers to such an extent. (Writer Takashi Kouzuki, 2016)

The choice of cast also contributed to its national success, The television drama adaptation featured a talented cast, including Yui Aragaki as Mikuri Moriyama and Gen Hoshino as Hiramasa Tsuzaki. Their chemistry on-screen and their ability to bring the characters to life no doubt contributed significantly to the show's success. The performances were greatly praised and helped to attract a large viewership. The aim of broadcasting stations is first and foremost to generate profits (Scherer, E. & Thelen, T., 2020), so the use of popular actors will ensure the success of the drama. Takahashi Kouzuki (2016), the main aim was to create a "cute" romantic comedy that would be appreciated and enjoyed by its audience. To achieve this, the choice of cast is of great significance.

Another fundamental element in explaining the drama's success is its cultural relevance to contemporary Japan. Japanese audiences related to the story's exploration of societal pressures, professional challenges, and unorthodox relationships. It captured the essence of contemporary Japan, where many young people deal with similar challenges in both their personal and professional lives. For example, women have less job opportunities due to that fact that they also have to take on most of the responsibilities relating to housework and child raising (Kan and Hertog 2017). In addition, while female labour participation in the labour market has increased in Japan, the M-curve- where women leave and later return to the labour market, persists, along with the high number of women in part-time employment (Macnaughtan, 2015). The drama also depicts the struggles of the modern generation who are troubled by the weight of old-fashioned values that are still present in Japanese society:

> 世間で「正しい」とされる価値観を押し付けられることに飽き飽きし、そこから逃げようとする人々を肯定的に描いた『逃げ恥』。闘うのではなく、自分のために逃げてもいいという多様な生き方を示した。(若田悠希 / Yuki Wakata, 2021)
>
> Running away from shame" is a positive portrayal of people who are tired of having the values that are considered "right" by the world imposed on them and try to escape from them. Instead of fighting, it showed diverse ways of living and that it is okay to run away for one's own sake.

Moreover, the drama's success can also be attributed to the effective marketing and promotion: The drama received strong marketing support, which increased its visibility and created anticipation among viewers. Effective promotion, such as trailers, posters, and online campaigns, helped the show gain attention and draw in more viewers.

A combination of the aforementioned elements led to *Nigeru wa haji*'s critical success and financial success. The drama garnered strong ratings and received a number of awards and nominations. The movie adaptation did well at the box office as well, further establishing its popularity as an adaptation. Overall, *Nigeru wa haji* is an excellent example of a skilfully done adaptation that successfully brought a well-liked manga to life while enthralling viewers with its compelling plot, distinctive characters, humour, and cultural relevance.

2.3 Meeting the cast

In this section, I present briefly the main characters in the drama to make the analysis section more comprehensible.

Mikuri Moriyama (森山みくり）: She is the main female character and is played by the actress Yui Aragaki. She holds a master's degree in psychology and struggles to find stable employment, which is why she ends up accepting a temporary job. However, after her contract ends, she finds herself jobless (無職) and accepts to work as Hiromasa's housekeeper. In order to avoid having to move with her parents to the countryside after her father's retirement, she enters a contract marriage with Hiramasa (契約結婚), which provides her with a stable source of income in addition to a roof over her head.

Hiramasa Tsuzaki (津崎 平匡): He is a 36-year-old male who is among the best employees in the company. He describes himself as a "professional bachelor" and is still a virgin despite being in his thirties. To have someone live with him and take care of him, he enters a contract common-law marriage with Mikuri. Soon after getting married to Mikuri, he begins to have feelings and desires for Mikuri, which he tries desperately to repress.

Yuri Tsuchiya (土屋百合): She is Mikuri's 52-year-old aunt who wants Mikuri to address her by her first name instead of "Aunt". She is still a virgin and has never been married. Her character is depicted as a wealthy businesswoman. She wishes that she had experienced getting married when she was younger.

Numata (沼田): He is Hiramasa's homosexual co-worker. He demonstrates his cooking skills when he is welcomed for the first time into Mikuri's and Hiramasa's residence. He quickly realises that Hiramasa and Mikuri are not a conventional couple.

Ryota Kazami (風見涼太): he is 27-year-old Hiramasa's co-worker, who frequently questions the institution of marriage. After being pressured by his girlfriend to get married, he breaks up with her. Later, he moves to the same residential area as Mikuri's aunt Yuri.

Hideshi Hino (日野秀司): He is also one of Hiramasa's co-workers. He is a typical family-oriented married man.

Tanaka Yasue（田中安恵）: She is Mikuri's best friend

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Cultivation theory: The cultivation of Gender-Role Attitudes through Television in Japan

Cultivation theory is at the root of research on the ways in which television affects people's perceptions of social reality (Saito, 2007). Gerbner and colleagues argue that people's understanding of social reality reflects what they see on television; watching television on a regular basis contributes to "Mainstreaming" or homogenization of their view of the real world (Gerbner et al., 2000; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, 1986). Morgan (1990) claimed that "people who spend great amounts of time watching television are likely to be exposed to a more centralized, consistent, standardized ideology and worldview; hence, they should be more like each other than they like the members of their groups who watch less" (p. 244). Shanahan and Morgan (1999) asserted that the victimization and underrepresentation of women on television marginalizes them, while television traditionalizes the roles of women and places men in positions of power (p.96).

The portrayal of men and women on television dramas and television commercials tend to remain very traditionalistic and stereotypical (e.g., Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000; Furnham & Lay, 2019; Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, & Berkowitz, 1996). Iwao's (1993) content analysis research of Japanese drama programmes between the years 1977 to 1994 shows that women were underrepresented, and that while male characters tended to be middle-ages, female characters were in their twenties. According to Iwao, this shows the high value that is placed on the youthfulness of women in Japanese society, and that this tends to reinforce traditional views regarding gender roles. In addition, M. F. Suzuki (1995) asserted that "the reason that women in lower age brackets are used is that the highest value accorded to women in Japan is that they be young and "cute" or "beautiful." (p.79). Whereas men are selected to feature on tv shows for their "social standing, experience and education" (p. 79) women are selected based on their beauty and youthfulness. Here, it is worth mentioning the concept of "kawaii" (cute) in Japanese culture. Kawaii, meaning "cute", is a concept deeply rooted in Japanese society, used to describe everything from food and toys to mannerisms and clothing. It is a term that is also strongly associated with Japanese pop-culture (J-pop).

> Japanese expressions for women and men (…) reflect prevalent gender stereotypes and bias in society. Likewise, a large number of gender-related expressions in the Japanese language not only define acceptable and unacceptable traits and demeanours of women

> and men, but also designate their roles and status in society. (…) Gender asymmetry is found among the vast majority of expressions for women. (Takemaru, 2010).

"Kawaii" is also often used to praise (young) women who display traits that are socially acceptable such as gentility, refinement and courtesy (Miller 2011; Okamoto and Smith 2008; Asano-Cavanagh, 2014). Moreover, "kawaii is related with the notion of a young child", which emphasizes the close link of this term to notions of weakness, vulnerability and innocence (Asano-Cavanagh, 2014). Aoyama and Hartley (2010) argue that kawaii contributes to women's self-objectification to be approved by men.

Regarding characters' occupation status, men tended to have jobs considered "masculine," while women tended to be employed as housewives or at occupations that are considered stereotypically "feminine", such as working in nightclubs (Iwao, 1993). However, the portrayal of some female characters in "masculine" jobs (surgeon, etc), shows that women are not always limited to traditional gender roles.

However, Japanese television dramas have frequently tended to feature clichéd depictions of housework. Approximately 85% of female characters were shown working on housework. On the other hand, only between 5% to 19% of male characters carried out chores related to housework although the ratio has been increasing over time (Iwao, 1993). Iwao asserted that these representations of gender roles could reinforce and maintain conventional conceptions about gender roles. In addition, female characters in dramas and cartoons often tended to be portrayed as ''dependent, emotional, romantic, cute, tender, warm, dedicated, submissive, cheerful, and peaceful'' (M. F. Suzuki, 1995). However, female characters who displayed traditionally masculine traits such as intelligence and courage were not often seen on television. It is also worth mentioning that traditional depictions of gender roles are not limited to television dramas (Kunihiro, 1997): they also appear in educational programmes targeted towards children broadcasted by NHK (the national public broadcasting network), as well as on television advertisements on commercial broadcasting stations (Arima, 2003; Nobushima, 1998; M. F. Suzuki, 1995).

In addition, Saito's (2007) studies shows television does indeed tend to decelerate social and maintain the status quo by reinforcing traditional views and attitudes among its audience. However, he also argue that many societal changes in Japan would not have occurred without television.

3.2 Post-feminism

The term "post-feminism" is used in a variety of contexts; it might refer to an epistemic departure from previous feminist philosophy, a historical turning point following the height of second-wave feminism, or an imagined "backlash" against feminism (Gill 2007, 249). Feminist scholars examine the notion of "backlash" (Faludi 2009), with Yvonne Tasker et al. (2007) underlining the traditional tactics of resistance and compromise in feminist movement. The backlash thesis is complicated by Angela McRobbie (2009), who portrays post-feminism as a unique antifeminist feeling that differs from previous backlashes. Post-feminism acquires rhetorical force by implying that gender equality has been attained, and feminism is no longer necessary, as opposed to openly criticising feminism.

Due to a process of "disarticulation," which diminishes the foundation for collective feminist action, this leads to a twofold movement or entanglement in which feminism is both acknowledged and concurrently undone (McRobbie 2009, 26). Postfeminist discourses appropriate liberal feminist vocabulary, transforming concepts such as "choice" and "empowerment" into consumer activities, spreading throughout popular culture and the media, and even being used by governments in the West to promote a progressive view of gender and sexuality (2009, 1).

Neoliberal discourses imbued with postfeminist ideals place a premium on individuals and personal accountability. Postfeminist narratives become inextricably linked to the neoliberal perspective, which is typified by deregulation, the dismantling of social safety programmes, and the privatisation of public services. The emphasis of this combination is on personal responsibility and independence (Brown, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014). Post-feminism tries to create a present in which feminism is viewed as passé, even if it frequently implies that feminism is out of date. According to McRobbie (2009, 57), it involves "turning the clock forward" to achieve a post-feminist gender settlement, in which patriarchal standards are reintroduced in ostensibly new ways and conventional gender dynamics are altered.

Post-feminism, therefore, becomes a potent form of antifeminism, dismantling feminist politics under the guise of acknowledging it, concurrently perpetuating gender inequalities and reinstating patriarchal norms (McRobbie 2009).

4 STUDYING GENDER ROLES IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

After learning about the complicated relationships between post-feminism and neoliberalism, it is critical to situate these theoretical frameworks within the particular sociocultural setting of Japanese society. From the broader theoretical framework, the focus now shifts to the ways that gender dynamics are expressed in Japan. This chapter is structured into four main sections: marriage and childbirth, work-life balance, gender in the workplace, and masculinity. Each section provides insights into the sociocultural distinctions that define and contextualise gender roles in Japan. As an introductory section, it offers the analyst the perspectives they need to understand the drama's complex depiction of marriage, work relationships, and gender roles—as opposed to the analysis chapter that digs deeper into the play.

4.1 Historical background: the ideal of the "good wife, wise mother" (ryosai kenbo) during the Meiji period

It is also necessary to understand the historical context that influenced the dominant societal norms as we examine the complex terrain of family, inequality, and the work-family balance in modern-day Japan. A foundation was established during the Meiji period by the ideal of the "good wife, wise mother" (ryosai kenbo), which emphasised the critical role educated mothers played in raising children who might contribute to Japan's economic progress. Japan saw a shift in the post-war era that reinforced ingrained gender roles and societal norms by adopting the ideal of a dedicated full-time professional housewife and a hardworking by the *sarariiman* (henceforth"salaryman") as the husband.

The ideal of the "good wife, wise mother" (ryosai kenbo) was at the heart of government efforts during the Meiji period, emphasising the importance of the role of "educated mothers" in bringing up children who would contribute to Japan's economic growth (Shizuko 2013). Primary education became mandatory for boys and girls in the late 19th century, teaching reading, writing, math, and values aligned with future gender roles (Nolte and Hastings 1991). This underlined mothers' essential role in Japan's modernization (Shizuko 2013; Garon 1997).

<u>The salaryman and the professional housewife in post-war Japan</u>

In post-war Japan, the "good wife, wise mother" ideal was replaced by the model of a salaryman husband and a "professional" housewife devoted to family care (Vogel 2013). Mothers' roles in education were seen as requiring equal skill to their husbands' work (Vogel 1988; Imamura 1987; Hendry 1993). Despite educational and job opportunities, social policies—like tax, pension, and company practices—reinforced this gendered labour division.

Before the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (1985), women, expected to quit work upon childbirth, had fewer career opportunities, even as more attended university (Brinton, M. C. & Nagase, N. 2017; Kurotani 2014). Abe's "womenomics" policies mainly benefited affluent women (Dalton 2017), while balancing work and family remains challenging for most women due to workplace demands and high standards for motherhood.

This work-family balance issue also impacts men; long hours and breadwinner pressures can lead to "karoshi" or death by overwork (North et al., 2011). Men wishing to participate in childcare face societal expectations to provide, with job loss viewed as "social death" (Dasgupta 2013). This demanding work culture has led Japanese families to be seen as "quasi-single mother" households, showing the lasting impacts of a strict post-war labour division on both men and women's work-life balance.

After the second world war up until the 1990s, a complementary system emerged, where men were expected to find lifetime employment and women were expected to take on non-regular work to supplement the labour force (Macnaughtan 2005). This gendered segregation of employment in Japan is deeply rooted and still exists today (Assmann 2012; Macnaughtan 2015; Aronsson 2015; Dalton 2017). At the root of this gendered division of labour is the male breadwinner model: men were expected to be a productive member of society, while women were meant to stay at home to take care of the children (Macnaughtan 2015). The male breadwinner ideology, still ingrained in Japanese society, serves to reinforce daily work practices and hinders the effect of legislation to promote gender equality (Macnaughtan 2015).

4.2 Defining Gender and sexuality

Significance of defining gender and sexuality in the context of the drama:

The exploration of gender and sexuality is important to understand the complex human relationships depicted in the drama. By acknowledging gender as a socially constructed concept and understanding the complexities of sexuality, I aim to establish a theoretical framework for the upcoming analysis. This foundation will allow me to provide a detailed examination of how these elements intersect with the characters' experiences in the drama, shedding light on their interactions within broader societal constructs.

It has been widely acknowledged upon academics that the concept of "Gender," is something that is "socially constructed" (Butler, 1990) and is separate from biological sex (Erickson-Schroth et al., 2014; Fixmer-Oraiz &Wood, 2017). According to Uchida (1992), "gender is a major construct that organizes our world and social life" (p.562). Men and women take

different pathways in life (e.g., Friedan, 2013, Scott, 2018) because access to different sources of knowledge and opportunities are unequally distributed around the world. Building on this notion, according to Judith Butlers theory of *gender performativity*, gender identity is not an inherent quality but rather repeated performed acts that are associated with notions of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990). For Butler, these repeated actions are performances that uphold societal norms. Butler suggests that "intelligible" identities- those adhering to expected gender behaviours- are maintained through performance. She expands on the idea of gender as a social construct, thus emphasizing how cultural norms shape pathways for men and women in an unequal way. Butlers' ideas reveal that traditional gender roles are not fixed and can be challenged by questioning these norms (Butler, 1990). Moreover, gender is the result of the actions and achievements of people (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The way in which people interact in society can maintain, reinforce or on the contrary weaken socially constructed gender ideals (Deaux et al., 1987; Uchida, 1992).

Sexuality has been defined as the way in which a person feels, whether it be sexually or romantically, and how those feelings are expressed to the person of interest (Butler, 1990). In the same way, sexual orientation is strongly correlated with sexual attraction, behaviour and identity (Hall, 2019). Sexuality and gender may go hand in hand or influence each other. It is sometimes the case that the way a person feels sexually can affect the way they see themselves in terms of Gender. On the other hand, a person's gender identity may also shape their actions in a way that coincides with their sexual orientation. (Omori & Ota, 2023).

4.3 marriage and childbearing in Japan

1. Significance of exploring marriage and childbearing in Japan in the context of the drama *Nigeru wa haji*.

This section is about marriage and childrearing in Japan, offering a thorough comprehension of the structural forces and societal conventions that influence family dynamics. Contradictory results were found when examining the Second Demographic Transition theory (SDT), which holds that individualization is a major factor in the diversification of families in developed countries, in the context of Japan (Lee and Fujita, 2011). According to Lee and Fujita, the socio-institutional and economic environment calls into doubt the general applicability of SDT and points out the difficulties of Japan's circumstances.

I assessed by reviewing the literature on the changes in marriage and birth rates between the 1970s and 2015, that there is a notable trend marked by postponed marriages, declining fertility rates, and the rise of different types of partnerships. The impact of gender disparity on family

formation is seen in the persistent differences in labour market involvement and cultural expectations that underpin Japan's distinct family structure.

Moreover, opinions on marriage fluctuate, reflecting changing perspectives on the establishment of families. Japanese views are shaped by the dichotomy between traditional expectations and evolving habits, which makes them more receptive to unusual options. I believe that the conversation specifically touches on the idea of *jijitsukon* (common-law marriage), illuminating couples who defy traditional marital norms.

This investigation is essential to our understanding of the play *Nigeru wa haji*, offering insightful information on the expectations, gender roles, and social standards that the characters must deal with in their relationships. This foundation provides a prism through which we can study the drama's rich depiction of human interactions and consider the difficulties associated with marriage, childrearing, and gender dynamics in Japan.

2. Family formation and the second demographic transition (SDT) theory

According to the Second Demographic Transition theory (SDT), the main reason for the diversification of family in developed countries is the growing individualization of people's views towards family formation (e.g., Lesthaeghe 1983; Hertog et al., 2020). Proponents of the STD claim that this theory is applicable worldwide e (e.g., Lesthaeghe 2014), evidence from East Asia, particularly Japan, is contradictory (e.g., Lee and Fujita, 2011). Although the STD framework predicts continued individualization and liberalization of views, it acknowledges that the rate of change may be influenced by the structural and cultural heritage of a society (Raymo, 2022).

Lee et al claims that the universal applicability of the STD theory is restricted by the socio-institutional and economic context. They argue that while attitudes towards women's labour market participation and gender ideology have become less unequal, attitudes towards women's labour have tended to become more traditional (Lee and Fujita). Attitudes towards women's earnings have changed, with men becoming accepting of women's earnings. In Japan, marriage is still a "package" of gender-specific duties and obligations, structured and reinforced by the normative and institutional environment (Bumpass et al. 2009). Because the dominant social institutions have not changed, we should not anticipate the liberalization and individualization of attitudes predicted by the STD, according to Hertog et al (2020).

3. Japan's marriage and birth rates after 1970

In Japan, there has been a significant shift in marriage and childbearing behaviours between 1970s and 2015 (Hertog et al., 2020). the average age at first marriage has increased, and fertility rates have plunged. In Japan, because alternative partnership forms are rare, being single often signifies "effective singleness," which means being celibate and engaging in little or no interaction with the members of the opposite sex (Jones 2007). Moreover, in Japan, singlehood often goes hand in hand with childlessness (Hertog et al., 2020).

Marriages that take place later in life has led to fewer children, who also tend to be born later. The gap between children has also lengthened (Hertog et al., 2020). Jones (2007) described the situation where young people decide to not get married the "flight from marriage". This situation can be seen in Japan. According to the Cabinet office of Japan (2021), in 2015, in Japan, the rates of unmarried men between the ages of 25 and 29 and 30-34 years were respectively 72.7 percent and 47 percent. The rates of unmarried between the ages of 25 and 29 and 30-34 years were respectively 61.3 percent and 34.6 percent. In Japan, getting married is no longer seen as something that must be done (Matsuda, S. et al. 2024; NIPSSR, 2016), and cohabitation as a substitute to marriage is not widespread. Moreover, few children are born out of wedlock because it is often recognised as the societal norm to have children only after a couple gets married (Matsuda et al., 2024; Raymo and Iwasawa, 2005; Suzuki, 1995). Thus, the decrease in fertility is strongly correlated to the decline in marriages in Japan (Matsuda et al, 2024).

In Japan, the trends in family formation are influenced by high levels of gender inequality in not only the domestic but also the public spheres (Hertog et al., 2020). Although the education gender gap has nearly closed, labour market inequality continues, with women forming most of the precarious labour, low wages, low maternal employment rates, and few female senior managers or women on company boards (Estévez-Abe 2013; Nemoto 2016). Japan ranked 118th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report in 2024, which emphasises its important level of gender inequality (World Economic Forum, 2024).

In 1985, the Japanese government approved the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and introduced measures to make it easier for women to work and raise children at the same time. However, with childcare expenditure falling below the OECD average, these initiatives have little effect. Japan has the smallest number of publicly funded childcare options out of 33 nations, and its domestic labour division is highly unequal. Once married or after having children, it is often the case that women leave their full-time jobs and return later in life to the

labour force. In Japan, the gender salary gap is about the double of the OECD average. Moreover, Women have less employment choices due to the "second shift": wives take on most of the responsibilities relating to housework and child raising (Kan and Hertog, 2017). In addition, it is still expected of women to invest strongly in their children (e.g., Allison 2014). As a result, married women who have children still rely on their husband's oncome because their own employment is unstable, and getting married and having children usually is accompanied by many additional responsibilities.

Men's capacity to support their families has dropped because of the economic stagnation that accompanied Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s (Hertog et al., 2020). The average salary of males who are employed full-time has decreased over the previous 20 years, while unemployment rates for young men and long-term unemployment rates have increased (Brinton 2010; Genda & Brinton 2007; MHLW 2013). Marriages with men of similar or higher status are more difficult to secure because of women's greater education and labour-market engagement. The fact that women have a desire to "marry up" (Raymo and Iwasawa 2005; Shirahase 2014) means it is hard for poorly qualified men to find a partner (Raymo and Iwasawa 2005). As a result of this, traditional marriages are now rarely attainable and often impractical (Hertog et al., 2020). There is no evident alternative to the conventional marriage pattern as women struggle to balance their professional lives and their children, which has caused a "drift into singlehood" (Hertog et al., 2020).

4. Attitudes regarding Marriage

According to the second demographic transition theory (Hertog et al., 2020), personal view towards family formation, which are becoming more a matter of personal choice, are related to women's growing participation in public life and withdrawal from motherhood in Japan.

"As the tension continues to build between traditional expectations and changing behaviours, Japanese attitudes are increasingly accepting of behaviours once strongly disapproved, and marriage and childbearing are increasingly being seen as discretionary" (Bumpass et al., 2009, 229; see also Lesthaeghe 2014).

Arranged marriages in Japan have become less common in postwar Japan. Today, marriage is seen as a personal decision. Attitudes regarding starting a family have only modestly changed (MHLW 2013, 61, 70, 73; NIPSSR 2015). The number of people who still want to get married and have children is still high.

The traditional division of labour within married families has grown less appealing and expected, with most singles preferring to create families where the wife temporarily quits her job and returns to the workforce or where both the husband and wife pursue their careers throughout their marriage (NIPSSR 2015). Since the late 1990s, this trend has significantly slowed down, and a recent study found that in Japan, attitudes regarding gender-based division of labour at home and in the labour, market has reached a standstill (Piotrowski et al., 2019). The percentage of men and women who feel mothers should be the only ones to take care of small children has declined, although it is still approximately 70% for both genders. However, due to the economic stagnation, fewer women expected to be able to stay at home in 2015. While men are becoming reluctant to be the only earner in the family, women are also starting to doubt their capacity to juggle work and family duties without significant help from their partners.

Although single-earner households are uncommon in Japan, it is expected of husbands to be the primary provider. The ideal situation is one where the wife gives up her job to focus on the household (Hertog et al., 2020). The couple's extended family, marriage websites (Dalton and Dales 2016), popular culture (Matanle et al. 2014), the press (Bobrowska and Conrad 2017), official legislation (OECD 2015), and business practices (Brinton and Nagase 2017) all serve to perpetuate this conventional division of labour.

Because men are expected to be the primary breadwinners, lower income and less stably employed men find themselves at a disadvantage on the marriage market. This is reinforced by the fact that many women are unwilling to marry a man without stable work, as it is seen as a sign of irresponsibility (Hertog et al., 2020).

5. Work-life balance and restriction of freedom after marriage

Both men and women in Japan tend associate marriage with restrictions of freedom and individuality. Many women equate becoming a mother with self-sacrifice (Rosenberger, 2013). Unmarried men perceive marriage as a restriction on their freedom and free time which is already limited by their busy working lives (MHLW 2014; Nemoto 2008). Men are now expected to participate more in housework and childcare.

In Japan, there is an important gender gap regarding the time spent on housework time (Tsutsui 2015, 173), for all couples and double-income households. There has been slight increase in men's involvement in household duties. In 2016, men contributed 13% of the couple's time spent on housework, while 20% of that was spent on childcare (Kan and Hertog, 2017). The

expectation to help in household chores while at the same time working full-time has also become a source of stress for some men (Taga 2017).

Men continue to work long hours; hence women are still primarily responsible for household chores (Hidaka 2010; Nemoto 2008. For women who only work part-time and can get a spot in a nursery, having access to childcare has made jiggling work and family less complicated (Hertog et al., 2020). However, it has not reduced the total amount of paid and unpaid labour that women in full-time employment do (Hertog, 2008). Long waiting lists are still present for nurseries (Japanese Economy Information Division 2005; MHLW 2016). Additionally, there is no official assistance offered for significantly more time-consuming responsibilities around the house. As a result, marriage and having children are linked with a sharp increase in household work and a loss of financial independence (MHLW 2014; Nemoto 2008).

The Japanese labour market makes it difficult to imagine an unconventional distribution of labour, which encourages preconceptions about the people of the opposite sex who are more likely to get married. Marriage is regarded as an "exchange of gendered obligations," which lessens their important for achieving personal fulfilment. It is challenging to achieve emotional connection when the husband and wife spend most of their times in separate private and public spheres, (Hertog et al., 2020).

The main reasons that make Japanese people want to marry can be summarized as follow; the desire to cohabit with a loved one and avoid being alone in old age (MHLW 2013; NIPSSR 2015); the desire to start a family and have children. This suggests that marriage is still the sole method to guarantee a nonrelative's company for the rest of your life. Desiring to reassure one's parents and family members is also essential, indicating that marriage, in part, remains something to be decided as a family (Hertog et al., 2020). Even though marriage is no longer viewed as "optional" in Japan the way it is in many developed western nations, there is no longer as much social pressure to get married by a certain age (Nemoto 2008; Yoshida 2017).

6. Common-law Marriage (事実婚）in Japan

In Japan, to get legally married, the couple in question must submit a marriage notification form to the local city office called shiyakusho (市役所: city hall), or kuyakusho (区役所: district ward or office). As they submit this form, either the husband's family or the wife's family name must be chosen. In most cases, the husband's family name is chosen. In Japan, pressure from family, colleagues, and society in general lead many women to take up their husband's family

name when they get married. Having to choose a single surname is written in Article 750 of the civil code, and dates back to the Meiji era. (White, 2021)

While it is sometimes assumed that Japanese women are comfortable with changing their family name to their husbands upon marriage, there are many Japanese people who are against this practice. In Japan, women's rights activists such as Yoko Sakamoto, are advocating for legislative reform that would enable couples to choose their family name. According to these female activists, the one-surname requirement is troublesome because it forces women to go through the hassle of changing their names in official or legal document. As more and more women are working nowadays, many of them wish to keep using their maiden name at their place of employment. While some companies permit women to use their maiden names at work, these are still far and few between. There has been an increase in public support for dual-surname option, and surveys have shown that a majority now supports the option for married couples to keep separate surname (Asahi Shimbun, 2023).

The term (*jijitsukon*) 事実婚 can be translated to English as "common-law or real marriage. It is derived from the word jitsu (実】 which signifies true or real, and kon (婚), which means marriage. The term was created to oppose the ie seido and the koseki process of registration. The ie seido and Koseki system is characterised by the idea that a wife is marrying into her husband's family. This is represented through a many expressions and terms in the Japanese language, such as 嫁に行く(yome ni iku: to go as a daughter-in-law) and koseki ni hairi （戸籍に入る: to enter a koseki) (White, 2021).

While *jijitsukon* is well-known among families who have such relationships, the term is not that well-known in Japanese society. In much the same way as terms such as 夫婦別姓 (fufubessei: married couples who have different surnames) and 婚外子（kongaishi)（kongaishi:children who are not born inside wedlock), the term *jijitsukon* is not that widely known in Japanese society. The historical events and choices taken during the Meiji era led to the highly rigid family structure that persists in contemporary Japan through the koseki system. (White, 2021)

The term *jijitsukon* seemed to have been used for the first time in popular media in 2017, when the monthly journal "days Japan" published an article dedicated to *jijitsukon* (White, 2021). For this article, the author interviewed a certain number of couples who defined their relationship as *jijitsukon*. These couples were opposed to certain major characteristics of the institution of marriage in Japan, such as the registration of the man's name in the koseki which implies that

the husband is the head of the family. These couples were against having to choose one surname for the whole family and rejected the family's hierarchical system that is clearly depicted in the koseki papers. Women who decide to not get legally married may feel more independent by not complying to societal expectations of when a standard couple is. Thus, to those couples who live together but are not legally married, the koseki system is perceived as reproducing the hegemonic gender roles. According to data published by "Days Japan" (2017), the percentage of *jijitsukon* marriages in Japan is still rather low.

However, married couples who are not legally married and live in a *jijitsukon* arrangement face considerable issues. Women who are not legally married but have a child with their husbands are technically single mothers. In Japan, the birth of a child born out of wedlock is viewed in a very negative light. Thus, women, in a *jijitsukon* arrangements may face discrimination and stigmatization, which may pressure them into marrying legally and taking their husband's name. The contemporary issues that *jijitsukon* couples with children face can be explained by the history of men's intimate relationships outside of marriage and the stigmatisation of children who were born "illegitimately" from concubines or mistresses. (White, 2021)

4.2 Gender and the workplace

Significance of exploring gender and the workplace in Japan in the context of the drama analysis

For a thorough understanding of the drama *Nigeru wa haji*, it is necessary to understand the complex dynamics of gender in the workplace. This section reveals the profoundly embedded gendered division of labour in Japan by examining the historical setting of the post-World War II era up to the 1990s. The backdrop of the drama is the male breadwinner model's persistence and the difficulties presented by legislative attempts to promote gender equality, which serve as the protagonists' hardships.

The investigation of business procedures, obstacles to female leadership positions, and gendered performance standards enhances our comprehension of how social conventions influence the characters' careers. This in-depth examination of gender dynamics in the workplace helps us better understand the characters' experiences as the drama negotiates the relationships and societal expectations by illuminating the larger social constructs that shape their decisions and obstacles.

While women labour participation rate is now equal of that of other developed countries, the fact remains that Japan ranked 114 out of 144 nations in terms of Gender Equality (WEF 2017).

This can be explained by the fact that the mechanisms supporting the male breadwinner model are still in place; such as the spousal tax system that makes it more profitable for women to spend most of their time on household chores (Saito 2007; Macnaughtan 2015).

Although the introduction of "womeneconomic" encouraged more women to work, the type of employment that was offered to women did not challenge gender norms, and the ideal of the male breadwinner model was still at the heart of workplace practices (Macnaughtan 2015). This results in the reproduction of gender practices and behaviours dominated by men in the employment system, as women end up leaving the regular employment system (Macnaughtan, 2015).

The Equal employment opportunity law in (1986), which was supposed to reduce gender discrimination at work, ironically served to do the contrary: it separated men and women into two career paths, respectively the general track (sōgoshoku) and the clerical track (ippanshoku). This was "preferential treatment "for women, as it diminished the bulk of their work so that they could spend more time on domestic work" (Yamada 2013). However, it meant that while men took up jobs that held the promise of promotion and stability, women were confined to clerical and support jobs. Thus, the EEEOl continued to encourage segregation and gendering of careers in the workplace (Macnaughtan, 2015).

Gender segregation was at the heart of the Japanese employment system in the years that followed the second world war. While men took up lifetime employment, women were more commonly found to be working at irregular employment (Vogel 1988). As mentioned briefly previously, this division of labour was described as a favour towards women, as they would not have to move for work (Clark 1979). At the core of the legislation was the idea that women employees were not to be treated the same way as their male colleagues. However, these workplace practices led to deeply rooted gender segregation in the employment system (Osawa 2000, 2006; Macnaughtan 2005).

Although female labour participation in the labour market has increased in Japan, the M-curve remains a reality, as well as the prominence of women working part-time jobs (Macnaughtan, 2015). Economic needs as well as changes in the demographic structure has led to the government pushing more women to enter the labour market. To rejuvenate the economy, counter the diminishing labour pool due to depopulation, as well as mitigate the economic challenges posed by an aging population, the Japanese government has encouraged women to join the labour force (Shinkawa 2012).

The dip in the female M curve due to opting out of the employment system to raise children, as well as the high percentage of older women in irregular employment shows that stopping work for child-rearing continues to limit women's chances to access regular employment (Macnaughtan, 2015). While the percentage of women employed has increased, women still count for more than two thirds of all non-regular employees (Annual Labor Force Survey 2016). This shows that the ideological and structural foundation at the heart of the female employment has hardly changed since the post-war years, resulting in difficulty in balancing family and career. As a result, men often find themselves compelled to be the breadwinner of the family (Macnaughtan, 2015).

Corporate practices are at the heart of gender inequality in the employment system. The low proportion of female managers in Japan show that there are barriers impeding gender equality and that women are the victims of prejudice in the workplace (Aronsson 2015). The corporate practices that began during the post-war years are still present today and still have an impact on the employment of men and women. While there is only a little proportion of female workers in the main career track, temporary female workers are common (Nemoto 2016). The practice of tracking leads to unintentional discrimination: Educated women are faced with a "gender order in the workplace" (shokuba no jendā chitsujo) that is demotivating and limits their satisfaction at work.

In the drama *Nigeru wa haji*, women encounter structural barriers in professional settings, and the drama illustrates how men and women are judged by different standards, emphasizing the societal pressures that women face to conform to traditional roles. Everyday practices related to "performance" and "promotion" also contribute to gender inequality in the workplace (Shire 2000). Men and women used to be judged based on different criteria in the workplace. women are judged on appearance, attitude, and manners, while men are evaluated on their analysis and decision-making skills (Shire 2000). The way in which men and women's workspaces are placed in the workplace (spatial-positioning) suggests a male-centred hierarchy (Macnaughtan, 2015). It is also tacitly conveyed to women that they are expected to stop working were they to get married (Macnaughtan, 2015). In addition, tasks that require a high level of competence are often assigned to men instead of women (Macnaughtan, 2015). women also need to make more effort than men for their competence at work to be recognized (Macnaughtan, 2015). These corporate practices that favour men lead to women resigning or choosing jobs that allow them to juggle child rearing and work (Macnaughtan, 2015). According to Nemoto (2016), the

lack of females in managerial positions further reinforced gender biases and decisions made by male leaders.

In the Japanese employment system, career promotion is based on continuous service. Employees are expected to work long hours and be loyal and commit to their company (Macnaughtan, 2015). Employees are asked to work overtime at short notice and used to be transferred or relocated anytime (Imai 2010). This unpredictability location wise and time wise makes it difficult for men to contribute to housework, which in turn makes it hard for women to compete with men in the workplace, as they must do most house chores. This is reinforced by the lack available spaces childcare institutions and the shortage of childcare workers (Abe 2013). The Japanese government is also reluctant to make up for this shortage of workers through immigrant workers. This shows that policies aiming at marketizing women's unpaid domestic work are still lacking (Macnaughtan, 2015).

To achieve gender equality, it is necessary to analyse the relationship between employment and domestic labour. There needs to be a revision of male employment practices in Japan; it is not only women who need to be the target of revisions in the employment system (Macnaughtan, 2015). The little time that men spend on housework compared to their female counterparts (men spend about 54 minutes on housework per day while women spend 4.18 hours per day (NHK 2015) is due to the long hours men spend at work. In 2015, men in their thirties spent on average 9.3 hours on work per day; 33 percent of men worked more than ten hours per day, while men ages between 30 and 40 worked more than sixty hours a week (NHK 2015). While the Japanese government sought to encourage fathers to take on more household responsibilities through the "ikumen" movement, Japan male participation in unpaid domestic labour still ranks the lowest within OECD countries (JILPT 2016). Since 1995, men's long working hours have hardly changed. Thus, if the culture of long working hours for men does not change, it will be difficult for men to participate more in household chores. At the same time, it is hard for women to be able to work more if their must shoulder most household tasks (Macnaughtan, 2015).

The gendered employment system in Japan contributes to correlate Japanese masculinity with work (Macnaughtan, 2015). According to Cook (2016) being a normative adult in Japanese society today is equated to that of being a salaryman. Indeed, most male fresh graduates wish to secure the status of that of a regular employee, as it linked to status, wages, and career promotion (Dasgupta 2013; Chiang and Ohtake 2014). This means that men feel pressured to

find regular employment, which contributes to the cycle of gender inequality in Japanese society (Macnaughtan, 2015).

Moreover, the establishment of the male breadwinner model has significant implications for single-mother households, which face considerable economic challenges due to Japan's "familialist" welfare model (Shirahase 2014). High poverty rates among single mothers are exacerbated by the fact that these families often experience financial instability, even when the mothers are employed (OECD 2006). Despite 80 percent of single mothers working, a staggering 58.7 percent lived in poverty in 2009 (Abe 2013). This situation emphasizes the limited effectiveness of current policies, such as the children's allowance (jidō fuyō teate), in alleviating poverty among single-mother households (Akaishi 2014).

Furthermore, single mothers with lower educational attainment struggle more than those who are better educated, as they are less likely to secure agreements for child support and possess fewer resources (Fujiwara 2008, MHLW 2011). The economic constraints faced by families with limited financial resources directly impact children's educational opportunities. These challenges are not only rooted in financial limitations but are also compounded by parents' limited time, cultural resources, and knowledge on how to support their children's education (Kudomi 1993; Hasegawa 2014).

Together, these factors illustrate how the entrenched male breadwinner model perpetuates gender-based roles and strengthens social and economic inequalities among Japanese families (Osawa 2006).

4.3 Masculinity studies in Japan

Understanding the dynamics inside the drama *Nigeru wa Haji* requires a thorough exploration of Japanese theories on masculinity. The examination of the salaryman as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity offers us a prism through which to view the social norms that mould the characters in the play. The post-World War II period and the emergence of the salaryman ideal clarify the historical background impacting ideas about what it means to be a man. In addition, this section discusses non-traditional masculinities such as the evolving role of ikumen (involved fathers) and alternative masculinities like that of vegetarian males.

The direct connection between this information and the topics and character depictions in *Nigeru wa haji* makes it relevant. This examination of masculinity in Japan helps us better comprehend the characters' fights against or adherence to social norms as the drama negotiates complicated relationships and expectations, which ultimately enriches our analysis of the story.

1. Hegemonic masculinity in Japan

Dasgupta describes hegemonic masculinity as follows:

> [T]he discourse of masculinity which at a given time in a given society has the greatest ideological power, both in relation to women and femininity/ies, and in relation to other coexisting and intersecting masculinities. Thus, hegemonic masculinity may be regarded as the cultural "ideal" or "blueprint" that has a powerful (and often unarticulated) presence in the lives of men and women. However, at the same time, as Connell stresses, it need not be the most usual form, nor the "most comfortable" (Dasgupta, 2000, 189-200).

In Japan, hegemonic masculinity is represented by the salaryman. The salaryman embodies the ideals of Japanese masculinity, such as productivity and being the "breadwinner" of the family.

2.The emergence of hegemonic masculinity after the second world war

After the Second World War, the heterosexual, patriarchal family ideology persisted. Men were expected to be the breadwinner of the family (or Daikokubashira), and women were expected to be home keepers, or full-time housewives. The term *Daikokubashira* refers to the wooden pillar that is placed in the middle of traditional wooden Japanese houses that enable the structure to hold together (Roberson&Suzuki, 2005). *Diakokubashira* also refers to the male breadwinner and is a vital component of Japanese hegemonic masculinity. The fact that the term "daikokubashira" is still used today to describe men with families shows that men are still expected to be the central person supporting the family (Dalton & Dales, 2016). It was during the 1950s and 1960s, during Japan's period of rapid economic growth, that the salaryman ideal of masculinity was developed and reinforced. Japanese society became clearly more gendered and the ideal of the male breadwinner and the housewife became standardized. This marital unit formed what is called "*complementary incompetence*," that is to say that the husband and wife are codependent on each other: The salaryman needs their wives to be able to entirely devote their time and energy to their jobs, while their wife is financially reliant upon their husband. Indeed, in most case Japanese companies expected their employer's full dedication to them, which is difficult to achieve without the contribution of the housewife (Charlebois, 2013) The ability to provide for one's family is the source of pride of men and is a central aspect of Japanese hegemonic masculinity (Dalton & Dales, 2016).

3. Alternative masculinities' Herbivore men

Alternative masculinities, also called "non-hegemonic," or "subordinated," have been discussed in academic literature since the 2000s. Alternative masculinities are the other kinds of masculinities that exist alongside the "hegemonic masculinity", and against which they are measured (Roberson and Suzuki 2005).

One of these alternative masculinities is the "Sōshokukei danshi" (herbivore boys). The term "herbivore" (soushokukei") in Japan is used to describe young people, particularly young men, who do not actively pursue sexual and romantic relationships (Fukasawa, 2009). "Herbivore men" can be concentrated to "carnivores" (nikushokukei"), who look for partners in a proactive manner. The phenomenon of "herbivorazation" can be said to be one of the notable features of the younger generation in Japan (Morioka M, 2013). Herbivore men have been described as slim heterosexual men who lack professional ambition, consumerists, and mostly uninterested in pursuing the opposite sex (Fukasawa, 2009). For some Japanese men, it is no longer as important to marry before a certain age and have a stable job (Nemoto 2008). According to Charlebois (2013), the emergence of non-hegemonic, oppositional masculinity has been influenced by various sociocultural trends. Herbivore masculinity has emerged as a response to a changing social landscape and leaves behind the salaryman hegemonic masculinity.

4. An Alternative Masculinity, Ikumen

Many academics have discussed the changing roles of men in contemporary Japan. Much research has focused on the "ikumen" figure. The term ikumen is a combination of the word "Ikuji," meaning childcare, and the word "men." It is also a wordplay on the word *ikemen*, which refers to a good-looking man, thus pointing out that men who are involved in raising their children are "cool" (Mizukoshi et al. 2016). While some academics consider ikumen to be an "alternative masculinities" Charlebois (2013), others judge it to be simply a shift in the hegemonic ideal Ishii-Kuntz (2005). The emergence of the ikumen has also said to be demonstrated to be a strategy used by the Japanese government to tackle the current demographic issues Ishii-Kuntz (2005). Ishii-Kuntz (2005) claimed that "the conduct of fatherhood has not caught up with the culture"': in other words, while men are increasingly expected to take part in childcare, the hight expectations placed on them to be the "breadwinner" of the family and work long hours make it difficult to achieve.

Miles (2017) describes contemporary masculinity in Japan as "ability", in other words, in "what a man is able to do" (dekiru otoko). For example, Herbivore men are said not to be taking enough action when it comes to dating or sex (Charlebois 2013; Morioka 2013). Irregular

workers are thought not working adequately enough to support their families (Cook, 2016, 2017), while otaku and thought to be failing at expressing their interest in the opposite sex' (Galbraith 2015)

Moreover, academics have argued that masculine ideals in Japan are now less linked to marriage and work, and more to how one's image one represents oneself in society (Miles 2017). Contemporary Japan has seen the emergence of alternative, "softer masculinities." Idols such as Arashi embody this kind of softer masculinities, in the way that they are portrayed as being tender hearted, sensitive, and approachable. Alternative masculinities are often represented as men who are not very active romantically or sexually, and as problematic in Japanese society (Morioka 2013; Saladin 2015).

4.4 Gender roles and expectations in Japanese Society

The next section gives background information for comprehending the dynamics in the drama *Nigeru wa haji* and offers a thorough examination of gender roles and expectations in Japanese society. The show emphasizes the relationship between media, language, intimacy, and familial structures, which mirrors the societal milieu in which the drama's characters deal with their romantic relationships.

Characters in the play have difficulties in balancing their own desires with those of society, which is closely related to the influence of media representations, changing expressions of intimacy, and conventional conventions in modern-day Japan. The examination of misogyny in Japanese media, the shifting nature of intimacy, and the changing roles of parents in raising their children are all important frameworks for analysing and placing the experiences of the characters in the drama of our choice.

1. Gender inequality and media in Japan

Sally McLaren et al (2020) argues that gender hierarchies and patriarchal norms in Japan are reinforced by the media. She explains that Japan is a "media-saturated society." In daily life in Japan, people are exposed to normative images of femininity and masculinity. Both traditional media (advertisements) and "new media" (social media, YouTube) that can be found in public spaces in Japan, such as the train, show media messages that are highly gendered and contribute to maintaining gender ideals and norms in Japan. Sally McLaren et al (2020) describes how the stereotyping associated with media misogyny in Japan not only have an influence on women but also on non-hegemonic masculinities and sexual minorities.

The Japanese media industry is dominated by six main media companies: Asahi, Mainichi, Nikkei, Sankei, Yomiuri as a well as the public broadcaster NHK (McLaren et al, 2020). These companies reach a wide audience, of course through new media but also through traditional media such as newspapers in magazines, of which circulation rates are still unexpectedly high in Japan (Villi and Hayashi 2017). Moreover, television viewing is still immensely popular in Japan (Yoshimoto 2010).

Japanese media is deceptively colourful and varied (McNeill 2014, 64). However, entertainment and news media are highly conservative and controlled. This can be explained by the fact that the advertising industry in Japan is dominated by three companies, including Dentsu, Hakuhodo and ADK. Dentsu has for long time been affiliated e with the Liberal Democratic Party. Moreover, the press club system (kisha kurabu) contributes to the homogenization of views as only mainstream media companies have direct on-site access to information from the government, religious organizations, universities, etc. In addition, the media industry in Japan is said to be a "male-dominated corporate society": most top management positions are occupied by men (Ishiyama 2016) and women are the victim of the "gender track" system (Shikata 2018, 133), which limits them to fulfil certain roles in the organization, such as "assistants" (Takenobu 2017, 7) to their male counterparts. Thus, the overwhelming representation of men in the Japanese media industry contributes to perpetuating the gendered hierarchy in the media landscape (McLaren et al., 2020).

From the 1970 up until about 2010, studies surrounding gender and the media in Japan agreed in fact that TV portrays gendered images of men and women. These studies criticised the fact that women were limited to being represented as "domestic creatures" (Painter, 1993), while men were portrayed in professional roles (Valaskivi 2015, 69) Painter (1993) emphasised the fact that while changes were already on the way in the mid-1990s, "the continuing domination of television programming and production by older males has kept TV firmly on the conservative side in cultural struggles over gender"(57). Suzuki's (1995) also argued that many television commercials "depict women in the role of housekeeper and child rearer" (79). and the position of men as newscaster and women as assistants reinforces "the traditional discriminatory division of labour" (79).

From the 2010s onwards, two research trends developed. The first recent trend is the "hypervisibility "(Maree 2018) of LGTB and queer identities in the mainstream media. Suganuma (2018) argues that queer representations have been used to entertain the audience as well as to reestablish heteronormativity. Thus, while sexual minorities have become more

visible to the public eye, there is still progress to be made in terms of public acceptance and legal rights (Maree 2017). The second noteworthy trend is the reinforcement of gender norms and ideals through idol culture (Miller 2011). Young female Japanese idols are expected to project an image of cuteness and innocence while at the same time appearing seductive and attractive to men.

2. Misogyny in Japanese Media

Sally McLaren et al (2020) also argues that misogyny is very present in the Japanese media industry and contributes to reinforce gender norms. "Media misogyny" covers not only the hate and fear of women, but also the critics of men are do not conform to hegemonic masculinities, as well as the exclusion of gender and sexual minorities.

For example, herbivore men are not seen as being "adequate men" due to their inertia in romantic situations and lack of motivation to pursue a goal and thus are represented as being partially responsible for the drastic decline in population in Japan. In the media, herbivore men are represented in a negative light, as being bad at communicating and expressing their feelings and have no desire to form sexual or romantic relationships. However, Saladin (2015) argues that the portrayal of herbivore men in the drama Ohitorisama a (*The Single Lady, Han Choru and Ueda Hisashi*) offers a positive well-rounded representation of herbivore men and can help to dissuade the anxiety associated with non-hegemonic masculinities.

Misogyny can be described as the punishment of women who are considered "bad" because they defy male domination (Manne, 2017). Misogyny is the result of gender inequality and sexism (McLaren et al., 2020). Adherence to gender norms is reinforced by the fact that women are praised if they follow female gender norms, as well as the fact that men while do not conform to the notion of hegemonic masculinity are not viewed in a positive light (Manne, 2017).

3. Language and Gender

Because Japanese language is divided into feminine and masculine speech, language may reinforce gender identity, norms, and ideals. Japanese "Women's language is characterized by softer first-person pronouns such as atashi, the use of particles such as "no yo" at the end of sentences, the incorporation of honorific as well as a manner of speech that is not as assertive and direct as men's speech (Shibamoto Smith 1985). Women tend to use a higher tone and employ speech patterns that are commonly associated with a less assertive or forceful manner of speaking (Hiramoto and Wong 2005). Thus, since a young age, Japanese boys and girls are

careful speak in a way that is considered right for their respective gender and thus fulfil gender expectations. According to Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood (2017), the use onē-kotoba, which translates to “Queens language”, which refers to gay male speech in Japan, holds the ability to influence how individuals perceive their own gender identity, establish the mood of communication, as well as underline social and inter-gender issues that need addressing.

In Japan, women are still expected to fit into the image of “good wife and wise mother” and have a limited period in which it is acceptable to present themselves as sexually attractive (Imamura 1987) Imamura argues that innocence in women is a trait that is highly valued and is perpetrated and reinforced through idol culture in Japan. Moreover, the fact that female idols in Japan must present an image of innocence is an indicator of the objectification of women through the male gaze . Use of specific language to appear feminine can reflect “a skewed power difference, dominant heterosexual values, and the male gaze” (Omori and Ota, 2023).

4.Intimacy in relationships in Japan

Intimacy in Japanese relationships can be said to be defined by three characteristics: firstly, it exists within the private lives of individuals; The essence of intimacy extends beyond the realms of love and sex; it includes the actions involved in building families, marriages, and friendships, as well as the responsibilities of childbearing, raising children, and providing care for others (Plummer 2003). Secondly, intimate relationships are clearly recognizable with “particularized knowledge received, and attention provided” (Zelizer 2010, 268). Thirdly, intimacy is not merely confined to the private sphere, in the way that politics and the government often have their say in the matter, for example, abortion rights and homosexual marriages. In the Japanese language, there is a wide range of vocabulary available that can be used to indicate intimate relationships. Romantic love is described using various expressions, such as ren’ai, ai, daisuki, and rabu (love). For example, it is more common for people to confess their love saying “daisuki,” rather than “aishiteru,” the latter being considered too conservative or formal.

To understand intimacy and relationship in contemporary Japan, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of family and intimacy in the postwar Japan. Edwards (1989) argues that spouses during that time were connected through their “complementary incompetence”; that is to say, women were financially dependent on their husband while men were dependant on their wives to create the domestic environment necessary for them to thrive at their jobs. Alexy (2020), describes this “complementary incompetence” as rather being “disconnected dependence”, in

the sense that while couples were mutually dependent on each other, they were socially and emotionally disconnected.

In Japan, today, the plummeting birth rate and the aging population is a major issue. Japan's demographic pyramid is becoming too heavy at the top, in other words, it will soon become difficulty for younger generations to financially sustain their elderly through taxes (Traphagan and Knight 2003). Falling fertility rates are the results of intimate decisions; Japanese people are now less motivated to have children and create their own families, and this is reflective and causing major social changes (Alexy, 2020).

During the postwar decades, unmarked gendered social norms characterized Japanese society. Married couples consisted of a breadwinner husband and a stay-at-home wife lived together within an extended family network, influenced by gender-specific roles established within the stem family system, also 0known as " ie seido." Intimacy was thus expressed through actions that may initially not be seen to incorporate such emotions (Alexy, 2020).

Since the 1990s, these norms have become less visible in Japanese society, and new patterns of behaviour have emerged. Nowadays, Japanese people are getting married later and ideologies surrounding divorce have shifted (Alexy 2020; Rosenberger 2013). Traditional married life now seems less appealing to many young Japanese people, and different forms or relationships and intimacy have emerged (Aoyama et al. 2015). Gay, lesbian, and queer people have become less “taboo” in Japanese society and steps towards formalizing these kinds of relationships are on the way (Alexy, 2020). Moreover, for young people securing “lifelong employment” like the post-war generation has become more difficult, and many find themselves doing part-time or temporary work. Japan has been describing as a disconnected society, a society (muen shakai; a bondless society): as people are no longer tied to extended families, lifelong employment or an education system that supports them, they might find themselves more isolated than previous generations (Allison 2014). Popular buzzwords words with positive connotations are used to describe these tendencies exist such as “independence” (jiritsu), “self-responsibility” (jiko sekinin), and “being true to oneself” (jibunrashisa) (Hook and Takeda 2007).While these new patterns in Japanese society are reflective of more choices and freedom, it has also in a way made life more uncertain and precarious by challenging the “social safety net” (Alexy, 2020).

Along with these intimate shifts in Japanese society, new ways to express love and affection have emerged (Alexy, 2020). In particular, in the mid 2000s, to save their marriage, couples

stared to be encouraged by the Japanese media but in counselling sessions to communicate their love consistently verbally to their partner, with words such as “I love you” (Ikeuchi 2002; TBS Broadcast Staff 2006).

Alexis (2020) argues that the importance of verbally communicating their affection and love indicates a shift in the way spouses approach their relationships. While in the past it was more common to express affection through fusion of the bodies (ittai) rather than verbal communication, nowadays communication is seen to be especially important in healthy relationships. Alexy (2020) calls this model for intimacy *“connected independence*”, in which couples strive to be connected through their love and affection rather than the gendered labour system, as opposed to the previously mentioned “disconnected dependence”.

5.The relationship between parents and children

Social norms from the past continue to influence the role of mothers and fathers in childrearing. According to Ivry (2009), many Japanese people believe that a child who is not raised by their mother during the initial three years of life may face difficulties, leading women to be less willing to pursue work after giving birth. In this perspective, being a nurturing mother is linked to actively being present to support one's children.

“Skinship” plays a key role in Japanese family life. Coined as “intimacy through touch,” skinship included the expression of love and affection through practices such as breast-feeding, co-sleeping, shared baths, and playful interactions (Caudill and Plath 1966). While it is most common for children to experience physical contact with their mothers, shifting parenting roles have resulted in greater involvement and expectations of fathers to be more emotionally involved in their children. The term ikumen, that appeared in the 2000s, denotes an "involved father” who takes the time to be actively involved in his children's lives (Ishii Kuntz 2005). The ikumen ideal did not revolve in a drastic change in gendered responsibilities in Japanese families, however, it did encourage fathers to be more engaged in their children's lives compared to previous generations (Alexy, 2020).

5 METHODS AND DATA

5.1 Data collection methods

This study utilizes a mixed-methods research design, where I will be combining qualitative analysis of the drama *Nigeru wa haji* with the analysis of audience reactions on social media platforms and blogs. This approach will allow an open-minded exploration of both the drama's portrayal of contemporary Japan and the perspectives of the audience.

1. Drama analysis

For my drama analysis, I use episodes of *Nigeru wa haji* as primary data source, where I employ a close-watching approach which means I view each episode multiple times. The method really allows me to engage with the drama, allowing me to understand subtilities related to narrative structure, characters, dialogues, visual symbolism, and thematic elements that reflect aspects of contemporary Japanese society.

Watching each episode several times was essential for my research it allowed me to go beyond surface-level understanding. By watching key scenes a few times, I was able to examine how socioeconomic challenges, gender roles, work-life balance and non-traditional relationships are portrayed in the drama. In addition, repeated viewing helps to understand how those themes evolve across the drama. This approach also aligns well with my goal of analysing specific aspects of Japanese society, as it helps ensure that I not only capture explicit messages but also implicit cues in character interactions.

Additionally, taking detailed notes during each episode viewing allowed me to be more observant and attentive as I progressively add new insights following my initial impressions. Note taking is an important part of qualitative analysis, as it helps us identify patterns, as well as the meaning of recurring themes and visual elements.

This method is well-suited to my research goals because it enabled me to engage in a thorough analysis of both broad and specific trends in Japanese society.

2. Audience reactions on social media and Blogs

Analysing audience reactions to the drama *Nigeru wa Haji* from various social media platforms is important to my research for several reasons. The drama not only reflects contemporary Japanese social issues but also the complexities of modern relationships, gender roles, and work-life balance. By gathering and analysing data from social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, but also blogs and online forums, I aimed to understand how viewers

interpreted and engaged with theses the above listed themes. Why it is important to analyse audience reactions for my research?

According to Lopez and Bucholtz (2017) “Authenticity is the result of authenticating practices that are enacted by users of language and other semiotic systems and ratified by those who observe these practices.” In other words, the authentic quality of the show *Nigeru wa haji* is created not only through the show itself but through the audience's interpretation of the show. We can see through the online comments that the viewers interpret the show in numerous ways.

The collected social media posts, comments, and blog entries will undergo qualitative content analysis. The researcher will read the data to gain a deep understanding of audience reactions and perspectives. The data will be systematically coded, categorizing responses based on emerging themes, sentiments, and viewpoints regarding the portrayal of contemporary Japan in the drama. The researcher will identify patterns, similarities, differences, and noteworthy insights, aiming to provide a broad analysis of the audience's reception and interpretation

Firstly, analysing audience reactions help to understand the cultural context. The drama N*igeru wa haji* portrays aspects of contemporary Japanese life, including struggles young adults face with employment, marriage, and social expectations. By analysing these audience reactions, it helps contextualize these issues within the cultural framework of Japan. This is especially important to understand how viewers relate to the characters and storylines, which helps us understand contemporary societal attitudes and norms.

Secondly, by collecting audience reactions from various social media platforms, it allows the researcher to include a broad spectrum of opinions. By including different platforms, we are likely to come across different demographics (age, gender, geographic locations), that can provide unique perspectives on the drama.

Additionally, by looking at audience reactions, we can see how the audience engages with the important themes of the drama. The drama addresses critical questions about traditional gender roles and how the institution of marriage is evolving in Japan. Audience reactions can reveal how effectively viewers relate with these themes, as well as how they interpret and judge the characters’ decisions. This analysis can shed light on how popular media can influence public discourse on important contemporary issues.

Moreover, social media enables individuals to express their feelings and connect with others in a way that it is easier to do in real life. Audiences can express how a particular scene, character development or plot twist made them feel. By analysing these reactions, we can better

understand the emotional impact of the drama. This demonstrates its significance in the viewers lives and how it may affect their perceptions in their own lives.

Furthermore, the way the audience understand and engages with the drama may influence their own behaviours and attitudes towards relationships and work. For example, discussions about common-law marriage can shape viewers' thoughts and actions in their own personal lives.

By analysing audience reactions to *Nigeru wa haji*, I aim to shed light on how viewers interpret and respond to the drama's themes, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of modern Japanese society.

5.2 Ethical considerations for the use of online content

In this section, I discuss the ethical considerations and decisions made regarding the use of publicly available online content, in particular Twitter posts and comments from discussion forums, in my research.

I firstly consulted the Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku regarding the appropriate use of online content for my thesis. Their guidance helped me shape the ethical framework of my research. The committee provided me with relevant materials and guidelines concerning the ethical use of publicly available data, which I have integrated into my understanding of research ethics and data usage.

Furthermore, I engaged in extensive discussions with my supervisor to determine the most appropriate course of action concerning the use of comments from social media and discussion forums. Together, we assessed the ethical implications and concluded that, in my specific case, it is acceptable to use these comments without obtaining explicit consent from the commentators.

This decision was based on several essential factors. First, contacting commentators for consent can be impractical or unfeasible in view of the vast number of potential sources and the nature of online discussions. Additionally, the content in question is publicly accessible and openly published, which implicitly indicates consent for public discourse. The comments analysed do not contain sensitive information, and the potential for harm to the commentators resulting from this research is minimal.

Moreover, the original comments are in Japanese, while my thesis is written in English, which means that I will be paraphrasing the content. These further distances the identity of the commentators from the text. Also, the comments that are used are from older discussions rather

than current or ongoing conversations, which helps reduce concerns about misrepresenting the comments or interrupting ongoing conversations. Finally, discussions regarding television series are a widespread practice in Japanese culture, which shows that there is a general acceptance of commentary in public forms.

Throughout this section, I tried to demonstrate the ethical integrity of my research approach. In view of all these considerations, I think it is unlikely that my methodology will face major criticism regarding the lack of consent forms from the commentators.

5.3 Data analysis Techniques

Drama Analysis and analysis of audience reaction through thematic analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data from the drama. The researcher will identify, and code recurring themes, patterns, and representations related to contemporary Japan. Initially, an open coding process will be employed to identify noteworthy features and concepts. These codes will be organized into meaningful categories and subcategories, which will then be refined and consolidated to develop a wide understanding of how the drama portrays various aspects of Japanese society.

In this section I strive to explain in detail how I made use of thematic analysis. Although thematic analysis was initially less recognized compared to methods like ethnography or phenomenology (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it has since gained widespread recognition and is now widely used in qualitative research. Some researchers view thematic analysis as a supporting process for other analytical methods rather than as an independent approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, others argue that it should be recognized as a distinct method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clark (2006) argue that thematic analysis is versatile qualitative research method that is suitable for various epistemologies and research questions. It is a method for "identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (1998) further describes thematic analysis as a bridge between qualitative and quantitative approaches, enabling communication across different research methods. According to Braun and Clark (2006), a well-done thematic analysis can yield reliable and meaningful findings.

I decided to use thematic analysis for my research because of its advantages in comparison to other methods. Thematic analysis offers a flexible and accessible approach that can adopt to various study needs, providing rich and detailed insights into data (Braun & Clarke, 2006;

King, 2004). Unlike other qualitative methods, it requires less theoretical and technical expertise, making it particularly suitable for beginners, as it is relatively straightforward and quick to learn (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King et al., 2004). Furthermore, Thematic analysis aids in summarizing essential elements of extensive datasets by promoting a structured approach, which helps researchers produce a well-organized and clear report (King et al., 2004).

However, thematic analysis has some drawbacks, especially when compared to other qualitative methods like grounded theory and ethnography. The limited literature on it can make it challenging for beginners to perform rigorous analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unlike certain methods, thematic analysis does not support claims about language use, and its flexibility can lead to inconsistencies in theme development (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Establishing a clear epistemological stance can help improve consistency and coherence in the findings (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

For this thesis, I made used of Braun and Clarks linear six-phased thematic analysis method. In the following sections I will describe these six phased process in detail.

Phase 1 Familiarizing myself with the data.

Qualitative data can encompass a wide range of formats, including recoded observations, focus groups, texts, documents, multimedia sources, policy manuals, and photographs. It also includes textual elements like field notes from participant observations, reflexive journal entries, and narratives (Thorne 2016; Barnett, J.M., 2002). To bolster the credibility of their findings and interpretations, qualitative researchers often employ triangulation by integrating multiple data collection methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For my research, I used two sets of data, episodes from the show *Nigeru wa haji*, which includes full transcriptions of key scenes I wanted to analyse in my thesis, as well as audience reactions that I found on social media and Japanese discussion forums. By not only relying on fictional data, but also integrating audience reactions in my chosen data, I aimed to bolster the credibility of my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Once we have collected our data, the researcher must immerse themselves in the data to familiarize themselves with its depth and complexity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Becoming immersed in the data requires actively reading it multiple times to identify meanings and patterns. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that researchers should review the entire dataset at least once before starting the coding process, as this familiarity can help shape ideas and reveal potential patterns. For my research, I watched the entire drama from beginning to end a few

times, and them rewatched each episodes several times. Within each episode, I rewatched key scenes to identify meanings and patterns relevant to my research. After transcribing key scenes, I also re read the transcription several times.

During this initial phase, Researchers can record their theoretical and reflective thoughts that emerge from immersing themselves in the data, including their values, interests, and insights about the research topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this phase, they may also jot down coding ideas that can be revisited in later stages of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For my research, during the first viewing of the drama, I jotted down my initial insights on a piece of paper, and reflected on how I could use certain scenes in my research.

Phase 2 generating initial codes

Once the researcher is familiar with the data and identifies key points (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the second phase begins. This second phase involves producing codes from the data. Coding allows the researcher to focus on key ideas within the data. Researchers transition from unstructured data to forming ideas about the content during the analysis process (Morse & Richards, 2002). Researchers identify key text sections and label them according to relevant themes (King et al., 2004). Braun and Clarke (2006) advise examining the complete dataset, ensuring that each data item receives attention and to allows researchers to discover notable features in the data that can be used to establish themes across the entire dataset. For my research, I examined episodes of the drama and online audience reactions, producing codes related to marriage, the ideals and perceptions surrounding it, family and work-life balance, gender roles and expectations, the portrayal of masculinity, work environment, as well as discrimination towards female and female empowerment and objectification of women, Work environment, Discrimination towards female and female empowerment.

Phase 3 searching for themes

After codes have been identified in the data, the third phase involves grouping these codes into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) describe a theme as a conceptual element that adds meaning to recurring experiences in varied forms. In this way, a theme encapsulates and brings together the essence of an experience as a cohesive whole (p. 362). Additionally, a theme's significance is not based on quantitative measures but on whether it captures something essential related to the main research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After identifying codes in my data, I grouped the codes together and organized them into

themes. After looking at the codes, the following themes stood out to me: marriage, social expectations, the workplace family dynamics, gender, and social representation.

Phase 4: reviewing themes

In this phase, researchers refine the set of themes identified earlier, assessing whether the coded data for each theme forms a coherent pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this review, researchers evaluate each theme's validity to ensure it reflects the meanings within the dataset. This phase may uncover issues in the initial coding, leading to necessary adjustments (King et al., 2004). Some themes might lack sufficient data or may be too varied, resulting in either merging or splitting themes as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By the end of this stage, researchers have a clearer sense of the themes, their interconnections, and the overall narrative they create (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In my research, after reviewing the themes I had identified—namely marriage, social expectations, workplace family dynamics, gender, and social representation—I realized I had developed too many themes, which could lead to fragmentation in my analysis. To create a more cohesive and organized framework, I decided to merge some of the themes together. For instance, I combined "marriage" and "family dynamics" to discuss societal expectations surrounding marriage and family roles more comprehensively. Additionally, merging "gender" with "social expectations" allowed for a deeper examination of how societal norms shape gender roles and perceptions. This consolidation helped streamline my analysis and enhanced the clarity and depth of my findings, leading to a more coherent narrative in my research.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes

In the fifth phase of thematic analysis, researchers focus on understanding the specific elements captured by each theme and their significance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They provide a detailed analysis of each theme, exploring the narratives they convey (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is important for theme titles to be engaging and to clearly reflect their content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, some data segments may be relevant to multiple themes, leading to overlaps (Pope et al., 2000). Researchers also consider how each theme fits into the broader context of the data set and its relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After reviewing the codes and themes in phase 4, I produced three main themes as follows:

The first theme is marriage and family dynamics. This theme regroups the following codes: Marriage ideals and perceptions, Representation of common-law marriage, Family, and work-life balance). This theme aims to understand societal expectations surrounding marriage and

family, including traditional and evolving perspectives on marriage and roles within a family context.

The second theme is gender and social expectations (Codes: *Gender dynamics*, *Portrayal of masculinity*, *Objectification of women*, *Discrimination against women*, *Female empowerment)* This theme addresses the portrayal and expectations of gender, including stereotypes, discrimination, and societal roles, as well as issues of empowerment and objectification.

The third theme is workplace and social representation (Codes: *Work environment*, *Representation of working women*, *Employment*, *LGBT issues*, *Idealistic portrayals).* This theme includes the broader social and workplace contexts, examining representations of diverse identities, work-life balance, and critiques of idealized portrayals.

Phase 6: producing the report

The final phase of thematic analysis occurs once themes are established, and the researcher is prepared to conduct the final analysis and draft the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This write-up should offer a concise, cohesive, and engaging overview of the data, linking findings across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thorne (2000) emphasizes the the importance of clearly communicating the logical steps behind findings to ensure credibility. Halpren (1983) recommends that researchers maintain detailed methodological notes, notes on trustworthiness, and an audit trail to streamline the reporting process. This phase consists of writing the analysis part of my thesis, following all the six steps outlined earlier.

6 ANALYSIS

The analysis section contains the excerpts of the show that I have chosen for close reading and analysis. I will analyse excerpts that I have organized by themes: gender roles and expectations; portrayal of masculinity; work environment; female discrimination and empowerment. By analysing and close reading carefully selected scenes from the drama, I aim to understand how the latter themes relating to contemporary Japan are portrayed and represented in the drama.

6.1 Analysis: theme 1: Marriage and family dynamics

1. The challenge of single motherhood in *Nigeru wa haji*

Single motherhood is a critical issue that is seen throughout the television drama. Mikuri's best friend experiences divorce and the challenges that come with raising a child as a single mother. One scene stood out to me, from episode 1.

In this scene (see **Excerpt: episode 1: 26:00**) from *Nigeru wa haji* Mikuri and her friend discuss the difficulties of being a single mother. Mikuri's friend reveals her frustration, stating, “I could not take it anymore. Washing underwear and cooking for a guy who is cheating on me… And he has never thanked me for anything!” She reflects on the past three years spent as a housewife, lamenting, “What a waste! If I’d spent those three years working, at least I’d have a career.” Despite caring for her child, she expresses concern about her husband's lack of financial support, saying, “I don’t have a career or even savings.” Mikuri acknowledges the challenges, commenting, “Being a single mother doesn’t sound easy.” The friend emphasizes the inequity of domestic labour, pointing out that a housewife's annual work is valued at “3,041,000 yen,” yet she receives no payment for her chores.

In a way, this scene can be seen as challenging traditional gender roles in many ways. firstly, there is a criticism of gendered expectations. Mikuri's friend is frustrated at having to handle all the domestics tasks without receiving at acknowledgement or gratitude in return. This challenges the expectation that women should solely focus on domestic duties and be subservient to their husbands. Indeed, in Japan, whether they are employed or not, women still carry most of the burden of performing household tasks. This critique of the traditional notion of women's primary role as homemakers aligns with the post-feminist perspective that questions and challenges traditional gender roles.

In addition, Mikuri’s friend expresses her regret at spending all her time being a housewife rather than building a career, this challenging the notion that women's worth is tied to her role in the household. This scene empowers women to prioritize their own aspirations and goals, by

putting an emphasis on the importance of economic independence and career fulfilment. The emphasis on women's economic independence relates to post-feminist ideals that encourage women to pursue their professional goals and achieve financial autonomy. Indeed, the emphasis of post-feminism is on personal responsibility and independence (Brown, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014).

Moreover, the conversation between Mikuri and her friend sheds light on the struggles of single mothers, regarding financial stability and employment opportunities. The situation in which Mikuri's friend finds herself is not uncommon in Japan. Rising divorce rates have led to an increase in the number of single-mother households. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the number of single-mother households was 1,238,000 in 2011, which is double the amount that was recorded in 1973. The increase in the number of single mothers is due to an increase in divorce rates. Mikuri is portrayed as casually acknowledging the expectation that, in the event of divorce, her friend would retain custody of her child. This portrayal reflects societal norms around custody and responsibility, hinting at the assumption that single mothers will continue to bear primary caregiving duties post-divorce. Such a representation emphasizes the gendered expectations placed on women within the family structure, where custody and caregiving are often seen as their sole responsibility. While this may be surprising to an international audience, in Japan it is most often the mother who gets full custody of the children when divorce happens, especially when small children are involved.

According to the National Institute of Population and social security research (2014), 84% of mothers received full custody of the child after the divorce. Mikuri's friend's anger at her husband's lack of appreciation for her work as a housewife is reflective of the traditionalistic and persistent gender norms and values that are still present in contemporary Japan. In Japan, wives, regardless of their employment status, still bear the majority of the burden of housework and child-rearing. Japan's gender gap in Housework is surprisingly high, even in comparison to its neighbouring east Asian countries: women do 10.8 times the share of housework that men do (Qian and Sayer, 2016). Even when the wife is fully employed, they do on average 72% of the housework on weekdays (Kobayashi et al., 2016). Mikuri's friend points out that she "devoted" the last three years to her husband. This is reminiscent of the post-war years of economic prosperity and the state ideology of the early 20th century "good wife, wise mother" and the male breadwinner model where women were expected to devote their lives to their husbands so that the nation could continue to thrive and prosper economically.

Mikuri's friend explains that because she has spent all these years as a housewife, she has no means to take care of the child, having no career or savings. Her situation reflects the situations of a substantial proportion of single mothers in Japan. The poverty of single mothers has become a pressing issue in contemporary Japan. Single mothers are often only employed on a part-time basis and their salaries are often low due to their lack of human capital and the significant amount of time spent away from the workforce. (Abe and Oishi 2005). Mikuri's friend exemplifies the challenges faced by single mothers in Japan, where financial support from ex-husbands is often lacking. Furthermore, the portrayal of single mothers in this context emphasizes the limited access to welfare assistance (such as *seikatsu hogo*) that many face. Through this character, the drama subtly reflects the systemic barriers single mothers encounter, emphasizing their struggles in a society that often provides little institutional support. Mikuri is portrayed as voicing the reality that single mothers often experience lower levels of well-being, due to economic hardships and stress related to their jobs. This characterization points out the socioeconomic struggles faced by single mothers, emphasizing how financial strain and balancing work responsibilities can impact their quality of life. Thus, the conversation between Mikuri and ger friend challenges the traditional norm ideal of the nuclear family and the assumption that women will always have a husband to provide financial support.

Furthermore, the fact that Mikuri's mentions the value of a housewife's annual labour challenges the lack of recognition of women's unpaid domestic labour. By putting a number, the value of unpaid domestic chores, this seen puts an emphasis on recognizing women's domestic contributions, which reflects post-feminist critiques of gendered labour divisions. Indeed, as mentioned in the contextual part of the thesis, policies aiming at marketizing women's unpaid domestic work are still lacking (Macnaughtan, 2015). Overall, many aspects of this scene reflect post-feminist ideals, such as the challenging of traditional gender roles, the focus on women's economic independence, as well as the recognition of unpaid labour.

Moreover, the drama addresses the social stigma that women face when they choose to leave a marriage, especially if they have children. In episode 5 (**Excerpt: episode 5: 32:12-**), Tanaka Yasue, Mikuri's best friend, returns from the municipal office after filing for divorce. Fighting back tears, she reveals the pressure she faced from her parents and others to stay in her marriage for the sake of her child: *"They said, 'You have a child. What are you thinking? It's only an affair. Can't you just let it go?'"* Despite these pleas, she explains that she could not forgive her husband and couldn't stand to be around him anymore. Struggling with guilt, she questions herself, wondering, *"Am I wrong? Am I narrow-minded? Should I have put up with it, for the*

sake of my child?" She begins to doubt her own efforts, asking if her actions might be *"destroying [her] child's happiness..."* Tanaka's decision to divorce despite societal pressure and familial expectations challenges the traditional gender roles that women should endure hardships and sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their families. The fact that she refuses to tolerate her husband's unfaithfulness challenges the notion that women should passively accept being mistreated in their marriage. Her decision to divorce reflects her assertion of individual agency and autonomy in making choices about her life, thus aligning with post-feminist ideals of the importance of women's autonomy. Moreover, Tanaka's decision to move to her parents' house after filing for a divorce reflects her desire to be supported outside of her marital relationship. This challenges the traditional gender norm that women should be dependant of their husbands for financial and emotional support. Overall, this scene challenges traditional gender roles by portraying a woman who asserts her agency, questions societal expectations, and looks for happiness and independence outside of institution of marriage.

2. Contrasting views and attitudes towards marriage and common-law marriage in *Nigeru wa haji*

The drama is quite modern and progressive in the way that it presents characters who have contrasting views on marriage. In the following scene, we have a rather pessimistic view of marriage, where marriage is not presented in a very positive light, and which reflect changing attitudes of the younger Japanese generation in contemporary Japan

In this scene (see **Excerpt: episode 1, 12:03-12:26)** a young couple, Kazami and his girlfriend, are discussing their relationship at a café. The girlfriend asks Kazami directly, "So, Kazami, are you saying that you're not going to marry me?" Kazami hesitates, responding, "Let's see, how should I put this… what's the benefit of marrying you? I'll have to start consulting you about things that I used to decide on my own. It'll just make things more annoying." When the girlfriend questions whether he finds being with her annoying, Kazami reassures her, saying, "I like you. It's fun to be with you." However, he abruptly shifts the conversation by asking, "Would you buy something you don't need?" before leaving the table. This scene seems to simultaneously challenge and reinforce traditional gender norms.

This scene challenges gender norms in several ways: firstly, the fact that Kazami is reluctant to get married to his girlfriend challenges traditional gender norms that men should pursue marriage and commitment. By questioning the benefits of marriage for himself, he challenges societal expectations. This reluctance to get married reflects the "flight from marriage" phenomena described by Jones (2007). In Japan, young people are nowadays more reluctant to

get married due to the package of gender-specific duties and obligations that accompany marriage these duties and obligations are structured and reinforced by the normative and institutional environment (Bumpass et al., 2009). Kazami's reluctance is most likely tied to the obligations that would accompany getting married to his girlfriend. His comparison of marriage to buying something that he does not need reflects a post-feminist perspective on agency and choice. To Kazami, marriage is portrayed as nothing more than a transaction, in which he would lose more than he would gain. This is reflective of the post-feminist discourse that favour individual choice and autonomy over being tied to traditional institutions such as marriage. Women and men in Japan tend to associate marriage with restrictions of freedom and individuality. Many women equate becoming a mother with self-sacrifice (Nakano & Wagatsuma, 2012). Unmarried men, such as Kazami, perceive marriage as a restriction of their freedom and free time which is already limited by their busy working lives (MHLW 2014; Nemato 2008). This is reinforced by the fact that men are now expected to contribute more to housework and childcare. The emphasis on autonomy and individual choice in a relationship challenges traditional gender norms through which men and women are expected to fulfil certain roles.

Through this portrayal, traditional gender norms are subtly reinforced, illustrating societal expectations around gender roles. Kazami's reluctance to engage in the conversation about marriage with his girlfriend reinforces traditional gender norms regarding men's lack of communication and emotional expression for men. According to, Alexy (2020), modern Japanese heteronormative relationships are characterized by more verbal communication. Communication is now seen to be very important in modern relationships. Kazami’s limited communication with his girlfriend stands in contrast to the open communication patterns typically associated with modern relationships, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms. In addition, the girlfriend's willingness to get married can be seen as reinforcing traditional gender norms that expect women to seek commitment and stability in relationships, this emphasising how these expectations continue to have an influence on people's choices. According to academics, the main reasons that Japanese people want to get married include the desire to cohabit with a loved one and avoid being alone in old age (MHLW 2013) as well as the desire to start a family and have children. This suggests that marriage is still the sole method to guarantee a nonrelatives company for the rest of your life.

Overall, while this scene challenges traditional gender norms, there are also elements that reenforce traditional gender norms. However, from a post-feminist perspective, this scene

mostly challenges gender norms by emphasising the importance of individual agency and autonomy.

While the scene I have just analysed presents a rather negative view of marriage, other characters in the television drama view marriage in a more positive light. To illustrate this, I chose the following scene (see transcript **Excerpt: Episode 1, 13:54-14:09 - Lunch Break with Co-workers)**. During a lunch break, Hirasama is having a conversation with his co-workers. Kazami starts by questioning, "Why does everyone want to get married?" to which Hinou-san enthusiastically responds, "Because marriage is awesome, that's why! Look how happy I am!" Kazami acknowledges him with a sarcastic "You sure are." Hino thanks Kazami for his response, and then Numata turns to Tsuzaki, asking, "How about you, Tsuzaki? Want to get married?" Tsuzaki replies, "That's the furthest thing from my mind." This exchange reflects differing attitudes toward marriage among the group, with Hinou-san expressing a positive view while Kazami and Tsuzaki show scepticism.

This scene shows how there are contrasting views surrounding marriage in contemporary Japan. The fact that the characters can freely express their lack of interest in getting married reflects the changing attitudes regarding marriage in contemporary Japan. While marriage used to the social norm, and even though marriage is no longer viewed as "optional" in Japan the way it is in many developed western countries, there is no longer as much social pressure to get married by a certain age (Nemato 2008).

Kasami's questioning of why everyone wishes to get married reflects a questioning of traditional gender norms surrounding marriage and relationships. The is reflective of the notion of post-feminism as an epistemic departure from previous feminist philosophy, where individuals critically examine and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations (Gill 2007, 249). In addition, Tsuzuki's dismissal of marriage challenges the desirability and necessity of marriage, which emphasises the importance of individual agency and choices in handling relationships. This echoes postfeminist discourses that put a focus on the transformation of concepts such as "choice" and "empowerment" into consumer activities, thus acknowledging the importance of personal autonomy and independence. Indeed, Japanese attitudes are increasingly accepting of behaviours once strongly disapproved, and marriage and childbearing are increasingly being seen as discretionary (Bumpass et al, 2009). In addition, Tsuzuki's disinterest in marriage shows that he prioritizes personal autonomy and responsibility over conforming to societal expectations. This emphasis on personal accountability reflects a neoliberal perspective that prioritises individualism and deregulation. Thus, by questioning traditional gender norms,

emphasising individual agency and choice, and aligning with neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility, this scene reflects certain elements of the post-feminist discourse.

Until now, we have focused on scenes that reflect that way male characters in *Nigeru wa haji* view marriage. Japanese men and women attitudes to marriage are different, as women re men are socialized differently. Here it is relevant to mention Judith Butlers theory of gender performativity, according to which gender identity is not an inherent quality but repeated performed acts that are tied to notions of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990). For Butler, gender is a social construct and cultural norms shape pathways for men and women in an unequal way. Women, especially Japanese women, are taught to act “cute” (kawaii) and “feminine,” since they are little girls. For example, little girls are given dolls to play with, thus ingraining the idea in females that women's main role should revolve around taking care of babies, domesticity, and caregiving.

One scene in particular is worth focusing on here. In this scene in episode 1 (see Excerpt: episode 1, 14:52-), Mikuri is seen alone at her balcony as she spends another day housekeeping for Tatsuki. She says reflectively to herself “Maybe if I got married as a permanent job (永久就職=eikyuu shuushoku), I could escape from this endless job-hunting.” While this scene can be interpreted as a reflection of choice and personal responsibility, featuring Mikuri as a woman who can make decisions for herself, it primarily reinforces traditional gender norms. The term Mikuri uses here “eikyuu shuushoku,” is interesting because it is a term that is not as used today as it was in the past. The term eikyuu shuushoku literally means “permanent employment “and refers to a women getting married and becoming a housewife. In addition, it is not a term that I have come across in academic literature. This term was used because, when considering a woman as "moving" to a company, it seemed as if she was working as a housewife for her entire life at her new "home" (husband's family). The term 永久就職 (eikyuu shuushoku) first gained popularity during the Shōwa era (1926-1989) in Japan. However, in contemporary society, due to rising divorce rates and changes in values, the notion of housewives spending their entire lives at their in-laws has decreased. Additionally, with the decline of seniority-based pay and lifetime employment systems, even if women marry with the expectation of leading a stable life through their husbands’ employment, there is a significant possibility that their husbands may not be able to fulfil those employment plans as expected. As a result, the concept of marriage as "permanent employment" is fading. The fact that the term eikyuu shuushoku is used in the script of the drama could signify a return to more traditional values of the past.

Indeed, Mikuri's contemplation of marriage as an answer to her job-hunting struggles reflects the traditional societal expectation that women should prioritize marriage and family over their careers. This perpetuates the traditional gender norm that women main role revolves around domesticity and caregiving, instead of professional and personal fulfilment. This is reflective of post war ideals of "complementary incompetence" where husband and the wife mutually benefit from their union, through the husband being the breadwinner of the family and the women taking on a domestic role. By considering marriage as a means of escaping job hunting, Mikuri in a way reinforces traditional gender norms that women should financially rely on a male partner. This is consistent with the historical expectation that marriage provides financial support women, making men the breadwinner and women the dependant. Mikuri's contemplation suggests a lack of agency and autonomy in her decision-making process, as to her marriage is simply a way to put end to her economic struggles rather than a genuine desire to get married. This reinforces traditional gender norms that restrict women's autonomy and limit their options to fulfil societal expectations. Thus, we can say that this scene reinforces traditional gender roles by perpetuating the idea that women should give priority to marriage and be financially dependent on their husband. This idea is deeply rooted in the complementary system that emerged after the second world war, where men were expected to find lifetime employment and women were expected to take on non-regular work to supplement the labour force (Macnaughtan 2005). This gendered segregation of employment in Japan is deeply rooted and still exists today (Assman 2012). mechanisms supporting the male breadwinner model are still in place, such as the spousal tax system that makes it more profitable for women to spend most of their time doing household chores (Saito 2007; Macnaughtan 2015). While all this is not explicitly mentioned in this short monologue, the fact that Mikuri is contemplating marriage because she thinks it is the better option, it shows that societal structures are still present in Japanese society that encourage traditional gender roles.

However, it is worth noting that it is not only women that are socialized since a young age to be interested in babies and domesticity. Japanese men too are raised in the mindset that housekeeping and domestic tasks such as cooking and taking care of children are primarily female responsibilities. In Japan, the big gender gap means that women take on most of the household chores and tasks related to raising children. This can be illustrated by a scene in *Nigeru wa haji* (**Excerpt: episode 1, 43:12- 47:20**), where Mikuri and Tzuzaki have a conversation after Mikuri has spent the afternoon taking care of Tsuzaki and cooking for him, as part of her job. In this scene, Tsuzaki offers words of encouragement to Mikuri, saying,

“Moriyama…I think you’ll be able to find a husband. You’re good at cleaning, and you’re a great cook. And I think you’re good at taking care of others.” Mikuri responds dryly, “That’s enough praise to last a lifetime,” revealing her disinterest in marriage. Tsuzaki then suggests, “If you go to matchmaking parties…If you do what they call ‘marriage hunting’ (婚活 konkatsu), I’m sure you’ll find a partner.” But Mikuri clarifies, “I never wanted to get married.” Tsuzaki then reflects on his own struggles, sharing how he’s felt overlooked in both job hunting and his temp work, where he was often “passed over yet again.” He adds that he felt validated when Mikuri noticed his efforts, saying, “It made me happy. So easily.” Mikuri then reflects inwardly, speaking to herself and the audience about a universal longing for validation and connection: “We want someone to choose us…to tell us that they want us around…But it never seems to work out. So little by little, you learn to hide your emotions…That’s how we get through life.” This exchange focuses on themes of unfulfilled aspirations and the human desire for recognition and belonging.

Tsuzuki's praise of Mikuri's domestic skills, such as cleaning and cooking, reinforces traditional gender norms that associate women with domestic and caregiving roles. This contributes to reinforcing the stereotype that to attract a partner, women should excel at homemaking tasks. In addition, Tsuzuki's suggestion that Mikuri engage in marriage hunting (konkatsu) reflects the societal pressure placed on women to actively seek out marriage as a life goal. This reinforces the traditional gender norm that views marriage as an essential milestone in a women's life. In contemporary Japanese society, the difficult to find a marriage partner has resulted in “konkatsu,” the search for a marriage partner, to become a socially accepted activity in Japan (Nishimuru et al, 2022). Moreover, Tsuzuki's mentioning that Mikuri is still “young” and thus probably will have no problem finding a suitable marriage partner shows the high value that is still placed on youthfulness in Japan. According to Iwau, this tends to reinforce traditional views regarding gender roles. The value of youthfulness is also reflected in idol culture in Japan, which also tends to reinforce gender norms and ideals (Miller 2011).

While Mikuri's assertion that she never wants to get married reflects a sense of agency and autonomy, Tsuzuki's response suggesting the possibility of a contractual marriage implies that marriage is still seen as the default path for women, even if they are not interested in it. This emphasis is the limited agency and choices available to women when handling their relationships and life choices. Furthermore, Mikuri's internal musings on the desire to be chosen and need by someone, as well as her acknowledgment that women need to hide their emotions and supress vulnerability, reflects the societal expectation for women to prioritize others

emotional needs over their own, reinforcing traditional gender norms of self-sacrifice and emotional caretaking. This aligns with the fact that many women equate becoming a mother with self-sacrifice (Nakano M 2014, 57).

View and attitudes towards marriage among Japanese vary between men and women, but also between the older and younger generation. The drama revolves around *jijitsukon*, or how the female and male protagonists enter a "contractual marriage "also known as "common-law marriage."

Common-law marriage, or *jijitsukon*, is when a couple lives together and shares finances. What differentiates *jijitsukon* from legal marriage is the fact that the couple have not submitted the marriage notification form to the local city office (shiyakusho). In Japan, the number of couples living in a ijitsukon arrangement is still relatively low in comparison to couples who are legally married. Mikuri and her husband decide to present themselves as a married couple because they are afraid of being misunderstood by their friends and families. This is because Japan is a country where traditional gender norms are still deeply rooted in contemporary society, and people are expected to follow the standard life path by getting married officially. Thus, *jijitsukon* is not widely known in Japanese society. In other developed countries such as France, where gender norms are not as strong as in Japan, common-law marriage, or *jijitsukon*, is quite common. Indeed, Since the nineties, in France, the percentage of children born out of wedlock has been increasing. In 2022, this percentage reached 63.8 percent (Statista Research Department, Feb 3, 2023). the reason why some couples may decide to choose *jijitsukon* are as follows: some couples, for various reasons, may simple not be able to obtain a marriage licence. However, couples usually choose to enter a common-law marriage because they are opposed to some characteristics of the institution of marriage, including the ie system and the koseki process of registration.

However, many people do not understand that system is very true. In Japan, married couples who are not legally married and live in *jijitsukon* arrangement face considerable issues. For example, women who are not legally married but have a child with their husband are technically single mothers. In Japan, the birth of a child born out of wedlock not viewed in a positive light. Thus, women in a *jijitsukon* arrangement may face discrimination and stigmatization, which may pressure them into marrying legally and taking their husband's name. It is interesting to note that the contemporary issues that *jijitsukon* couples with children face may be explained by the history of men's intimate relationships outside of marriage and the stigmatization of children who were born "illegitimately" from concubines and mistresses (White, 2021)

Jijitsukon is still not well known amongst in Japanese society, not only amongst the younger generation but even more so amongst older generations. This can be illustrated when we look at this comical scene taken from the drama (**Excerpt: Episode 1, 51:00):** On the bus ride to tell Mikuri's parents about their marriage, Tsuzaki hesitantly admits, "I kind of got caught up in the moment and came with you…" Mikuri acknowledges with a simple "Yes," and then he nervously asks, "Your father, Mr. Moriyama…what should I say to him?" Mikuri teases him, "Please give me your daughter's hand in marriage," causing Tsuzaki to turn to her in surprise. She quickly laughs, "I'm joking! Just be honest and say it's a contractual marriage." Tsuzaki questions, "Will they allow it?" Mikuri notes her parents' traditional views, saying, "Probably not…they're still old-fashioned." Tsuzaki relates, "Mine too. They'd probably only recognize a traditional marriage." In this scene, we can see how hesitant Mikuri and Tsuzaki are when it comes to telling their parents about their decision to enter a contractual marriage. *Jijitsukon* can be translated to English as "common-law or real marriage." While *jijitsukon* is well known among families who have such relationships, the term is not well-known in Japanese society, nor is it seen in a positive light. Mikuri's suggestion to Tsuzaki that they be honest and tell the parents that the marriage is a contractual marriage (*Jijitsukon*) challenges the traditional expectation that marriage is a romantic union based on love and companionship.

By acknowledging the contractual nature of their marriage, the scene challenges the idealized portrayal of marriage perpetuated by traditional gender norms. Moreover, the fact that Mikuri wishes to be openly communicate with the parents reflects a sense of individual agency and autonomy in making life choices. This is reflective of the post-feminist perspectives that put an emphasis on the importance of individual agency when it comes to relationships and societal expectations. The conversation between the two young people about the fact that the parents are likely to disapprove of a contractual marriage can be seen as a criticism of traditional expectations places on children by their parents and reinforced the idea that societal norms and expectations can be restrictive and outdated. This, this scene emphasizes the tension between the traditional values of the older generation and the modern values of young people. As Bumpass et al argues (2009), "As tensions continue to build between traditional expectations and changing behaviours, Japanese attitudes are increasingly accepting of behaviours once strongly disapproved, and marriage and childbearing are increasingly being seen as discretionary". Following Bumpass's argument, this conversation between the characters about their parents' likely disapproval of a contractual marriage shows just how much attitudes are shifting. Young people are starting to value their own decisions over the expectations set by

previous generations. This change reflects a broader acceptance of different views on marriage and underlines the growing importance of individual agency in making life choices. This scene challenges traditional gender norms by portraying a nontraditional approach to marriage and relationships while also stressing the difficulty negotiating familial expectations and individual agency. This scene fits within a post-feminist framework by emphasising individual agency, being transparent and the criticism of traditional gender roles and expectations.

As is reflected in the scene we have just discussed, *jijitsukon* is less well tolerated among the older generation. However, that is not to say that the younger generation understand *jijitsukon* that well. This can be illustrated with the following scene (Excerpt, episode 2, 29:38-30:21): in this scene, Mikuri and Tsuzuki's anxiousness at keeping their cohabitation arrangement is comically illustrated. In this scene, after learning that two of his colleagues (Numata and Ryoto) are coming to visit his home to meet Mikuri, Tzuksaki rushes home in panic. Tsuzaki is worried that Numata, who is very perceptive, might find out that he and his wife are not actually legally married but living in *Jijitsukon*. Tzuzaki, in a panic and out of breath, urged his wife to hide all evidence of their *jijitsukon*. In particular, he urges Mikuri to get rid of the mail with her family name on it. This is because in Japan, when a couple gets legally married, either the wife's or the husband's family name must be registered in the Koseki (family registration system). It is not possible for a couple to register both their family names, and in most cases, the wife takes the husband's name because it is the "normal" thing to do. If Tsuzuki's colleagues saw that mail with Mikuri's unchanged family name on it, they would no doubt question the legality of Mikuri's and Tsuzuki's marriage. In episode three, when Ryota finds out that Hiramasas and Mikuri's marriage is a contractual marriage (Ryota: "It's a contractual marriage, isn't it? One with a salary." episode three, 41:51), Hiramasa's feelings of panic are clearly visible. Of course, Tsuzaki and Mikuri's living arrangements differ from a real "*jijitsukon*," as Tzusaki is employing Mikuri as his housekeeper.

3. Audience reaction on social media regarding common-law marriage, etc

It is not surprising that many of the comments I gathered on social media were linked to the idea of marriage, and common-law marriage, the central theme of the drama *Nigeru wa haji*. These comments suggests that the drama *Nigeru wa haji* may have contributed to a wider acceptance of common-law marriage in Japan. Of course, it is difficult to measure exactly to what extent this drama may have encouraged young couples to consider this rather new form of partnership. However, Comment **15** argues that the drama may have led to Japanese people, especially the younger generation, to be more accepting towards common-law marriage.

Comment 15:

I think *Nigehaji*[3] has contributed to a nationwide acceptance of common-law marriage, don't you think? Especially among the younger generation... With the decrease in weddings due to COVID-19, and in an era where there's no need to flaunt it to companies or friends anymore, wouldn't it be a good idea to try living in a common-law marriage first?"

This is reinforced C**omment 16**, where the commentator mentions how her grandmother described common-law marriage as being "strange" ("With your grandmother watching *Nigehaji* next to you, calling common-law marriage "strange", it seems like a battle of opinions is about to erupt").

Indeed, while *jijitsukon* is well-known among families who have such relationships, the term is not that well-known in Japanese society, as are terms such as *fūfubessei* (married couples who have different surnames) and Kongaishi (children who are not born inside wedlock). These historical events and choices taken during the Meiji era led to a highly rigid family structure that persists in contemporary Japan through the koseki system (White, 2021). **Comment 24** even describes the drama as being his or her "bible for life":

Comment 24:

Nigehaji really strikes a chord in my heart. Since watching that drama, I've also started to think that common-law marriage might be a clever idea. The way Mikuri and Hiramasa think just resonates with me. It's become the bible of my life!!

C**omment 18** argues that a common-law marriage might be a "better" idea than a normal marriage:

Comment 18

I've never seen a successful marriage. Marriage feels like the end of everything. Maybe common-law marriage is better. It seems like you can live with politeness even among close friends. That's probably the most sustainable relationship, like in *Nigehaji*.

Comment 19 (""I think marriage puts women in a disadvantageous position.")** and **20** both mention that women might be at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts in

[3] The drama is often referred to as "Nigehaji" for short, a term that appears frequently in audience comments.

Japanese society, thus emphasizing the gender gap in Japan. Indeed, Japan ranked 110 out of 149 countries in the Global Gender Gap report in 2018, which points out to its high level for gender inequality (World Economic Forum)We can assume that the reason the commentator thinks marriage puts women at a disadvantage is the fact that Japanese women, when they get married, oftentimes continue being employed while at the same time assuming most of the bulk of responsibilities of household chores and child rearing. This is referred to as the "second shift": where wives take on most of the responsibilities relating to housework and child raising (Kan and Hertog 2017). **Comment 20 "**It's tough being a woman. I've thought so since kindergarten." suggests that the way women are represented in the drama shows that women may face more difficulties and challenges than men. This relates to Shanahan and Morgan's ideas regarding the relationship between cultivation theory and gender role attitudes (1999), who argued that television traditionalizes the roles of women while putting men in a position of power in all aspects of society (p 96).

Many of the comments point out to how "progressive" and "ahead of its time" the drama is, such as separate surnames for married couples, same sex marriage, common-law marriage, flexible work hours, etc.

Comment 13

I've watched all of *Nigehaji*. Age gaps, genders, positions—none of it matters in love. Whether it's formalized with marriage or just a common-law relationship. Everyone has their own way.

Comment 17

I watched *Nigehaji*, and the scene about selective spousal surnames was a great move. The keywords are gender equality and diversity. Also, I think it's wonderful that there are various forms such as same-sex love, common-law marriage, and being single, and that they are mutually accepted. In reality, there seems to be a significant number of people who cannot keep up with or reject these new forms."

Comment 21:

Watching *Nigehaji*, I really feel it's ideal. A common-law marriage in employment situations is quite admirable.

Comment 22:

> Laughing at the beginning of labor isn't really appropriate, but it's adorable. I love how *Nigehaji* depicts a genderless society, it feels like. Separate surnames for married couples, same-sex marriage, common-law marriage, being single, men taking paternity leave, women returning to work, parenting, diverse sexual orientations, promoting painless childbirth, planned pregnancies— it's a drama of changing times.
>
> **Comment 23:**
>
> I'm rewatching *Nigehaji*, and initially, I was excited about how cute Gakky (Yui Aragaki), and Hoshino Gen were. But now, even though it's a five-year-old production, I'm amazed at how ahead of its time the drama was. Besides common-law marriage, concepts like flexible work hours due to Masaru-san's job, coming out, and other words related to today's diverse society are popping up left and right. It's shocking to realize it was such an innovative drama.

This drama may have resulted in more acceptance of not only common-law marriage but also same sex marriage. **Comment 12** claims that you can learn a lot about contemporary social issues in Japan:

> **Comment 12**
>
> *Nigehaji* is a great drama because you can learn from it. I first watched it when I was in the sixth grade, so I didn't notice much, but it teaches about common-law marriage, same-sex love, and age-gap relationships. You can really learn a lot from it.

This aligns with Anthony's concept of self-reflectivity, according to which TV dramas can help its audience to make choices about their lives: “individuals will ask themselves questions about everything from lifestyles and relationships to body image and self-therapy". Japanese TV dramas present a multitude of similar questions with choices acted out for the viewers “(Hu, 2005)

6.2 Analysis: theme 2: gender roles and social expectations

1. Gender gap in household chores depicted in *Nigeru wa haji*

The gender gap in Japan, especially in household responsibilities, remains significant, with women bearing the majority of domestic work regardless of their employment status. In *Nigeru wa Haji*, this gap is depicted through scenes that focus on the traditional expectation for women to handle housework and caregiving, while men are expected to focus on work outside the home.

In one scene from *Nigeru wa Haji* (**Excerpt, episode 8, 10:46-11:39**), Mikuri, her parents, and her brother's wife gather for tea. Mikuri's mother has a broken leg, and the conversation turns to household responsibilities. Mikuri asks, "Doesn't my brother do anything?" Her sister-in-law replies, "Nothing. When he gets home, he acts tired and asks for a massage." She mentions her concern about balancing work, childcare, and caring for her husband, especially since she will be returning to work soon. Mikuri's mother expresses regret, saying, "I'm sorry that I didn't raise him better. I was just a housewife. I really enjoyed my housework. I should have let him do more." There is also a playful exchange between Mikuri and her mother, who claims Mikuri "volunteered" to help with housework, which Mikuri questions. This scene challenges traditional gender norms and fits within a post-feminist framework in several ways: Firstly, the conversation between Mikuri, her sister-in-law and her mother emphasizes the unequal division of labour between the sexes. Mikuri's sister-in-law expresses her worries about whether she will be able to balance work, childcare, as well as household chores. Her mother mentions that's it is a good thing that she was able to find a daycare to place her children in, however, as Mikuri's sister-in-law is still worried about the amount of work she will have to do. This is reflective of the situation in Japan: indeed. For women who only work part-time and can get a spot in a nursery, having access to childcare has made juggling work and family less complicated (Hertog et al., 2020). However, as it has not reduced the total amount of paid and unpaid labour that women in full-time employment do (Hertog, 2008). As represented in the drama, this scene challenges the traditional gender norm that assigns the majority of household tasks to women. Mikuri's mother, a housewife, also wonders whether she should have tried to encourage her son to participate more in household tasks. This also challenges the gender role that places housework as solely a female responsibility.

This scene reflects and challenges the important gap in housework time that exists in Japan, including in double income families (Ishii-Kuntz, M. et al., 2004). Throughout the years, there has been little increase in men's involvement in household duties. In 2016, men contributed approximately 13 percent of the couples time spent on housework, while about 20 percent of that was spent on childcare (Kan, M.-Y. et al., 2019). The expectation to help in household chores while at the same time working full time has also become a source of stress for some men (Taga 2017). Moreover, Mikuri's mothers' acknowledgment of her enjoyment of housework challenges the notion that domestic labour, or unpaid labour, is inherently inferior or less valuable than paid employment. Overall, this scene challenges traditional gender norms

by putting an emphasis on the unequal division of household labour and acknowledging the value of unpaid domestic labour.

To further illustrate the unequal division of household chores, In another scene (see **Excerpt, episode 8, 10:00-10:30),** from episode 8, Mikuri and her mother reflect on Mikuri's father's lack of involvement in household chores. When Mikuri's mother says, "I really didn't think he would be this useless," Mikuri tries to defend her father by recalling that he helped cook during a camping trip. Her mother corrects her, saying she did most of the work, and her father "just lit the stove." When Mikuri's father overhears, he insists, "I didn't trick anyone. You just misunderstood." This prompts a further exchange where he lists his minimal contributions: taking out the trash and cleaning the bath "twice a month." Mikuri and her mother exchange exasperated looks, emphasizing their shared frustration at his limited help with housework. This scene also challenges traditional gender roles by emphasizing the unequal division of household labour. Mikuri and her mother's frustration with Mikuri's father's lack of participation in household chores challenges the traditional gender norm that women should take care of the household chores. In Japan, as mentioned before, there is an important gender gap regarding the time spent on housework, for both single- and double-income households (Ishii-Kuntz, M. et al., 2004). This scene encourages therefore challenges traditional gender roles by advocating for a more even share of division of household tasks between men and women.

Furthermore, *Nigeru wa Haji* centers on Mikuri and Tsuzaki, who enter a common-law marriage arrangement in which Mikuri is paid for performing household chores. By having Mikuri receive a salary, the show emphasizes the often unpaid labor that women typically undertake in Japan. In this scene from *Nigeru wa Haji* (**episode1, 48:26-49:51**), Tsuzaki presents a calculated proposal for a common-law marriage to Mikuri, where she would be paid for her household work. He explains, "Here's today's payment," and hands over a document detailing the estimated costs. Tsuzaki notes that "a housewife does 2,199 hours of unpaid labor per year," which he has calculated to be "3,041,000 yen" annually. Tsuzaki proposes that she would earn a salary, covering the equivalent costs of rent, utilities, and daily meals. He emphasizes, "Based on the trial calculations, letting you live here as part of a common-law marriage, and paying you a salary for working as a housewife, would be a worthwhile arrangement for me as well." When he tells her, "Of course, the final decision is up to you," Mikuri excitedly responds, "I'll do it! Please hire me!" Reflecting on the arrangement, she thinks to herself, "I receive a salary for doing the housework. I cannot tell this to people who do this work without compensation,"

acknowledging the societal expectation of unpaid domestic labor. In this scene, Tsuzaki proposes to Mikuri to enter a common-law marriage (*Jijitsukon*). Because Mikuri would be remunerated for her performance of household duties, this is of course different from a real *jijitsukon* partnership. However, there are many similarities to the common-law marriage, such as the fact that Mikuri's family register will stay the same. when a couple gets legally married in Japan, as they submit the marriage form to the city hall, either the husband's family or the wife's family name must be chosen. In most cases, the husband's family name is chosen. However, in a *jijitsukon*, women do not change their family name, and this may feel more independent by not complying to societal expectations. Thus, by not changing her name to Tsuzuki's family name, mikuri affirms her independence and autonomy. This scene challenges gender norm by presenting a nontraditional partnership, a common-law marriage, where Mikuri would be compensated for her housework. This challenges the traditional gender norm where women are often expected to so domestic work without being compensated or recognized. In addition, this scene puts a focus on economic independence and equality within the relationship, as Mikuri would receive financial compensation for her domestic contributions to the household. This challenges traditional gender roles that often depict women being dependant on their male counterparts. Furthermore, Mikuri's sense of autonomy and her choosing to enter this alternative partnership reflects post-feminist ideals of empowerment through making her own decisions. Overall, by suggesting an alternative form of partnership and household management, this scene goes against traditional gender norms. This scene also reflects the post-feminist ideals of agency, self-determination as well as financial empowerment for women.

While the show aims to spotlight the often unpaid household tasks performed by women—brought to light by Mikuri receiving compensation for her work within her *jijitsukon*(common-law marriage)—the drama also frequently portrays a more traditional gender dynamic, with the man as the breadwinner and the woman in a primarily domestic role.

In one scene (**Excerpt, episode 3, 27:32-28:40**), Mikuri, her aunt, Ryota, and Numata discuss Mikuri and Hiramasa's *jijitsukon* (common-law marriage). When Mikuri's aunt asks Hiramasa how married life is, he responds pragmatically: "My taxes and living expenses have gone down," to which the aunt humorously remarks, "That's your focus?" Numata points out that Tsuzaki is "the rational type," and Mikuri agrees, adding, "He's right."Hiramasa appreciates the practical benefits: "Homemade meals are cheaper than eating out, not to mention more nutritious." Mikuri takes pride in preparing "well-balanced meals" and handling other household duties like bank transfers. When Ryota asks if Hiramasa dislikes being restricted to

an allowance, Hiramasa clarifies that he manages their finances: "I decide the monthly budget, and make sure we both adhere to it." They discuss how they are still adjusting to managing expenses, but Mikuri optimistically concludes, “Things will go even better starting next month.”

This scene reinforces traditional gender norms in the sense that even though we know that Mikuri and Tsuzaki are in a common-law marriage, and Mikuri is being remunerated for her household chores, the scene still presents a traditional gender dynamic of “complementary incompetence” where Tsuzaki is perceived as the make breadwinner while Mikuri takes on a more traditional domestic role. In other words, even though in reality their actual arrangement is more nontraditional and equitable, what the audience sees as a traditional couple where the man is the provider the women take care if domestic chores. Mikuri's roles are remarkably similar to that of a “traditional” wife as she handles bank transfers and makes homecooked and balanced meals. However, in opposition to traditional married couple reminiscent of the post war era, where the wife normally handled the finances and gave her husband an “allowance,” here Hiramasa decides the monthly budget.

2. The portrayal of female discrimination, objectification and empowerment in *Nigeru wa haji*

Nigeru wa haji also explores themes of gender discrimination, objectification, and empowerment through various scenes that reveal the complexities women face in Japanese society. The drama subtly critiques the ways women are often viewed and treated in professional and social spheres while emphasizing moments of self-assertion and empowerment.

In one scene in episode 9 (**Excerpt, episode 9, 26:25-),** Tsuchiya is informed by her old college male friend, who is also her superior, that an advertisement for Godard (the company she works with) had been released and that he happened to see it as he was on a business trip in Nagoya. He tells her that the advertisement’s concept seemed different from usual and asks Tsuchiya if she approved of this ad before its release in the public. The ad the male friend is talking about is an advertisement for a perfume on which the following words are written:” I want to be loved down to the cellular level. Aiming for popular skin.” Tsuchiya in fact had not approved this ad, and is shocked by these words, as it is very different from the type of advertisement the company has created before. She complains to her boss, who responds with: “You don’t need to make a fuss over such a small matter. People naturally desire to be loved by members of the opposite sex. With this ad, we might be able to secure new customers. Tsuchiya responds by

saying “Of course I understand that some makers design with that concept in mind. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m asking whether that’s the direction we want to take. (shows an old ad). This is the image that we’ve maintained over the past ten years. “Live freely. Become beautiful.” 90 percent of our customers support this image. When the executives look at an ad like this, what will they think? Godard’s value is being denied by Godard itself. Are you really telling me that this is a small matter? Tsuchiya’s words are reinforced by her female friend who utters this short speech: “*The ghost from back then has come back. We used to make ads like this in the past. But no one liked them. We gathered all the female employees to discuss it. But no matter what we said to the higher-ups, they wouldn’t listen. After Tsuchiya became the head of the advertising department, we were finally able to make changes. Tsuchiya’s job includes all of our hopes and desires.”* Finally, Tsuchiya’s higher-ups give in to her demand and accept to change the advertisement.

This scene reflects the ways in which gender is represented in the advertisement industry in Japan. The way in which women are represented in advertisements has been said to contribute to solidifying gender stereotypes (Matthes, J. et al., 2016). In East Asian societies, including Japan women in advertisements are usually depicted as younger, wearing less clothing, and are more often used in marketing for cosmetics and toiletries than men. (Prieler, M. et al., 2015). The fact that older women are underrepresented in the media and advertisements have an impact on society’s conscience, by projecting the idea that younger women are more valuable than older women (Gerbner et al., 1980).

The way in which the models in advertisements are dressed can be seen to sexualize women, which can lead to mental and physical health issues such as depression and eating disorders (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Moreover, the fact that cosmetic toiletries products are often associated with females emphasizes the value society places on female beauty and reinforces the sexualization of women, which has been associated with negative body image (Dens et al., 2009).

According to Bandura (1986), stereotypical representations of men and women create a certain gender image and teaches people about gender expectations. Those stereotypical depictions may define socially acceptable behaviours for both genders (Carter & Steiner, 2003). Smith and Granados (2009) claim that the viewing of stereotypical advertisements decreases the interest in employment typically occupied by people of the opposite gender. Finally, the advertising business in many countries is still dominated by males, which may have an impact on gender

depictions (Lauzen, M. M. et al, 2008). Tsuchiya's reaction to the advertisement that was initially released, and the way she convinces her male superiors to change the ad, is a clear representation of female empowerment in a society in which gender norms are still deeply rooted, thus challenging traditional gender norms. Indeed, the words written on the initial advertisement, "細胞まで愛されたい。めざせモテ肌。" I want to be loved down to the cellular level. Aiming for popular skin," objectifies women and seems to imply that a women's main goal is to be loved by the male sex. This ad implies that women need to be beautiful not for themselves, but to please and satisfy their boyfriend/husbands, or men in general.

Another scene which can be seen as objectifying women is in episode 4. In episode four, Kazami asks Tsuzaki if it would be possible to "share" (シェア) Mikuri, that it to say that Kazami wishes to employ Mikuri as his housekeeper, like Tsuzaki is currently doing. Of course, this drama is primarily a comedy, and the idea of "sharing" Mikuri between the two men can be seen as quite humorous. However, it also in a way can be said to objectify Mikuri. Mikuri is no longer her own person (although she of course has her say in the arrangement). When Tsuzaki and Kazami discuss "sharing" Mikuri, Kazami tells Tsusaki "I wish Mikuri would come to my place too." Of course, what Kazami is saying is literally saying is that he wishes to employ Mikuri as his housekeeper too, however, his words also have a more romantic or even sexual connotation. They can be interpreted as Kazami and Tsuzaki sharing Mikuri's sexual favours. Although this interpretation can be seen as far-fetched, I think the sexual connotation of "sharing " Mikuri is not something that went unnoticed in the mind of the adult audience. In this way, Mikuri is being discussed by the two men in a rather objectifying manner. Mikuri's words convey this: *"Share? I am not an object or food. Will he really ignore the opinion of his employee? Even if he is the employer, he isn't allowed to do that. (*episode: 6:56) In this way, the concept of "sharing" Mikuri can be interpreted as being slightly denigrating and sexualizing towards Mikuri and women in general.

In another scene from episode 3 (Excerpt: episode 3, 26:01 -26:59) of *Nigeru wa haji*, Mikuri expresses pride in her "young and beautiful aunt," while Ryota reveals his discomfort with older women who dress in a certain way, saying, "They should act their age" (もっと思想の美しさをめざせばいいのに). Numata comments on Ryota's annoyance, and Ryota questions Mikuri about her aunt's behaviour, to which Mikuri smiles and confirms that her aunt "certainly acts her age." Later, Mikuri's aunt pulls her aside, asking, "Did that guy just call me an old woman?" Mikuri reassures her, saying, "He didn't say that. He complimented

you for acting your age." This scene has elements that both challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles.

Initially, Ryota criticized Mikuri's aunts' manner of dressing, which he views as not appropriate for her age. This suggests a narrow view of femininity. However, Mikuri's aunt defies traditional gender norms that dictate how women should look and behave based on their age, by asserting herself and confronting Ryota about his opinion. However, despite Mikuri's aunts confident reply to Ryoto, this scene can simultaneously be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender norms. The fact that Ryota thinks it is acceptable to comment on Mikuri's aunts' appearance reflects societal expectations that women should conform to certain standards of behaviour wise and appearance wise, regardless of their age. Moreover, the fact that Mikuri's aunt is happy at being complimented for "acting her age" reinforces the idea that to gain approval from others, women should adhere to certain societal norms. Regarding post-feminism, this scene emphasizes the contrast between challenging and reinforcing gender roles. While Mikuri's aunt stands up for herself and affirms her individuality and agency, the expectation for women to align with certain societal standards is still obvious.

The objectifying manner in which men discuss women in the drama can be illustrated with another scene from episode 3. In this scene from episode 3 (**Excerpt: episode 3, 7:10 -7:14**) of *Nigeru wa haji*, Tsuzaki is having lunch with colleagues when Numata praises Tsuzuki's wife, calling her "the ideal wife" and expressing a desire to marry her. Another colleague, intrigued, wants to meet her, while Numata adds, "Plus, she's pretty cute." The colleague questions Numata's attitude towards women, saying, "But you're so harsh on women!" However, Tsuzaki counters their compliments by dismissively stating, "She's not cute at all. It feels like I'm sharing a home with a cleaning lady in her sixties." This conversation between Tsuzaki and his colleagues occurs the day after Mikuri and Tsuzaki invited their colleagues over for dinner.

Numata praise of Tsuzuki's wife as "perfect" and "the ideal wife" can be seen as reinforcing traditional gender norms that objectify women based on their ability to be a "good wife." In addition, Tsuzuki's colleagues focus on physical appearance reinforced traditional gender norms that prioritize women's looks over qualities, and which contributes to the perpetuating of the objectification of women in society. Tsuzaki and his colleague mentions that Mikuri is "cute." The concept of kawaii is also often used to praise (young) women who display traits that are socially acceptable such as gentility, refinement, and courtesy (Miller 2011; Okamoto and Smith 2008; Asano-Cavanagh 2014). Moreover, according to Asano-Cavanagh (2014),

“kawaii is related with the notion of a young child”, which emphasizes the close link of this term to notions of weakness, vulnerability, and innocence. According to the feminist critiques Aoyama and Hartley (2010), kawaii contributes to women's self-objectification to be approved and accepted by men. In addition, Mikuri's feminine manner of speech contributes to her “cuteness.” Because, Japanese language is divided into feminine and masculine speech, language may reinforce gender ideals. Japanese “Women's language is characterized by softer first-person pronouns such as atashi, the use of particles such as “no yo” at the send of sentences, the incorporation of honorific as well as a manner of speech that is not as assertive and direct as men's speech (Shibamoto Smith 1985). This is clearly reflected in the way Tsuzaki and Mikuri communicate with each other throughout the series. Women tend to use a higher tone and employ speech patterns that are commonly associated with a less assertive or forceful manner of speaking (Hiramoto and Wong 2005). Use of specific language to appear feminine can reflect “a skewed power difference, dominant heterosexual values, and the male gaze” (Omori and Ota, 2023).

There is a focus on the value of youth in the *nigeru wa haji*, as can be seen in the following scene from episode 3. In this scene, set in a traditional Japanese-style temple where Mikuri’s aunt, Ryota, and Numata are enjoying grapes and red wine, Mikuri’s aunt playfully asks Ryota about his age, to which he responds, “Thirty-two.” She then teasingly remarks, “See? I could almost be your mother,” prompting Ryota to exclaim, “No way!” Mikuri’s aunt adds, “I could if I gave birth at 17,” leading Numata and Ryota to start calculating her age in their heads. She humorously interrupts them, saying, “Stop calculating!” Mikuri's aunt reluctance to openly state her age to her male friends suggests that she is at least slightly embarrassed of her age and emphasizes the value the youthfulness in Japanese culture. A study analysing the ages of characters in Japanese dramas showed that while male characters tended to be middle aged, female characters were in their twenties. According to Iwau, this shows that a high value is placed on the youthfulness of women in Japanese society, and this tends to reinforce traditional views regarding gender roles. In addition, M.F. Suzuki (1995) asserted that “that reason that women in lower age brackets are used is that the highest value accorded to women in Japan is that they be young, cute, or beautiful. While Suzuki’s comment was made more than two decades ago, not much has changed as youthfulness is still a highly valuable trait in Japanese women, which is also in part perpetuated by idol culture. While the terms “Christmas cake” and such to describe women who have passed the age of marriage are no longer as used, Japanese women who are past thirty still face more difficulty marrying than women in their twenties.

The stigma Japanese women face when they are single by a certain age is accentuated in the drama. One reason why Tsuchiya is reluctant to reveal her age is the fact that she is still single despite being in her fifties. Unmarried single women of a certain age may face disapproval in a society like Japan were there is a societal expectation that women should priority on marriage and family over their career.

In one scene (**episode 1, 16:22- 17:56**), Mikuri and her aunt, Tsuchiya Yuri, engage in a candid conversation in the living room. Tsuchiya, a 49-year-old single woman working in PR at a makeup company, reflects on her life choices with a sense of regret, stating, "If I'd known I'd end up like this, I would've just got married. Even getting divorced would've been easier than staying unmarried." She expresses the societal pressure she feels, lamenting that "when you're single at my age, people always try to figure out what went wrong." This scene reinforces traditional gender norms by depicting the stigma that unmarried women of a certain age face. Yuri's internal monologue reflects the societal expectation that women should put a priority on marriage and family over their careers. The fact that she regrets not getting married shows that getting married is still seen as the most accepted path to follow in Japanese society, and the one that supposedly brings women most happiness. This scene implies that being unmarried by a certain age is perceived strange and abnormal, thus reinforcing the stereotype that women get the most of their worth through marriage. This, this scene reinforces gender norms by focusing on the social stigma that single women face, as well as by portraying marriage as the most desirable and socially accepted life path for women. Indeed, in Japan, the idea of happiness is closely linked to following the standard lifestyle and life plan (Golstein-Gidoni, 2017).

In episode 9, another scene caught my attention that illustrate how being single by a certain age is considered strange in Japan. In this scene, after the advertisement change has been approved, Tsuchiya leaves the room and then overhears the conversation between her superiors.

Superior 1: "Tsuchiya isn't flexible at all."

Superior 2: "You can tell why she's still single"

Superior 1: "That's why she works so hard."

This scene reinforces traditional gender norms by perpetuating preconceived ideas about single women of a certain age like Tsuchiya in the workplace. Superior twos remark implies that Tsuchiya's lack of flexibility and her dedication to her job is linked to her not being married. This implies that the fact she is single somehow has an impact on her behaviour at work. This

perpetuates the societal expectation that women should put a priority on marriage and family over their career. In addition, the comment implying that Tsuchiya singleness is somewhat abnormal reinforces the idea that women should aspire to marriage to be happy and fulfilled. Overall, this scene can be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender norms by linking women's relationship status with her work ethic and professional competence.

In continuation of the scene I have just discussed, A bit later, Tsuchiya coincidentally meets her younger male colleague, Ryota. They are walking in the street.

In this poignant scene, Ryota points to a perfume advertisement created by Tsuchiya, saying, “That’s the one you made, right?” Tsuchiya confirms, expressing her joy at his compliment, “It makes me happy to hear a man say that. It makes me feel like there are people who understand me. It gives me courage.” She goes on to share her thoughts on empowerment, stating, “There’s beauty in being free. Take me for example. I’m a woman in her fifties. I feel I can contribute to society and give courage to others.” Tsuchiya emphasizes the importance of her role as a positive example for younger women who might feel uncertain about their futures, saying, “I want people to know that you can still enjoy life.” However, as she speaks, her emotions overwhelm her, and she begins to cry, asking, “Why am I…” Ryota responds by taking her in his arms and hugging her tightly, offering comfort and support in her moment of vulnerability. In this scene, Tsuchiya is complimented by her male colleague regarding the advertisement she made, making her feel proud of her professional achievements. This challenges the traditional gender norm that women find most of their worth and value through marriage and having children. Moreover, in this scene Tsuchiya's challenges the notion that women's value diminishes as they age by affirming her resilience and her capability to contribute to society and inspire others. She wishes to inspire young women and show that they should not be afraid of being single. Furthermore, Ryota display of support and understanding towards Tsuchiya's feelings challenges traditional gender roles that often portray men as being emotionally distant or unresponsive. His willingness to offer emotional support contributes to a more equal dynamic between the genders.

However, while this scene challenges traditional gender norms, it can also be interpreted as reinforcing them. Indeed, while Tsuchiya words carry a message of female empowerment and agency, the sadness we perceive in her voice as well as her emotional vulnerability seem to contradict what she is saying. In a way, she seems to be trying to convince herself that she doesn't mind being single and unmarried at her age. In addition, the satisfaction and happiness she feels when Ryota compliments her on the advertisement, as well as the emotional support

given by Ryota, also seems to reinforce gender norms regarding women needing male validation and acceptance.

3. The portrayal of masculinity in *Nigeru wa haji*

In Japan, hegemonic masculinity is represented by the "salaryman". The "salaryman" embodies the ideals of Japanese masculinity, such as productivity and being the "breadwinner" of the family.

In *Nigeru wa haji*, the male protagonist displays characteristic traits of the hegemonic male as he has a reputable job and is considered the "breadwinner" in his unconventional partnership with the female protagonist. However, Hiramasa also displays traits that are considered "unmasculine" in Japanese society, and more characteristic of "alternative," "non hegemonic," and "subordinated" masculinities. Alternative masculinities are the other kinds of masculinities that exist alongside the "hegemonic masculinity," and against which they are measured (Roberson and Suzuki 2005).

One of these alternative masculinities is the "Sōshokukei danshi" (herbivore boys). The term "herbivore" (soushokukei") in Japan is used to describe young people, particularly young men, who do not actively pursue sexual and romantic relationships (Morioka M, 2013). "Herbivore men" can be concentrated to "carnivores" (nikushikukei), who look for partners in a proactive manner. The phenomenon of "herbivorazation can be said to be one of the notable features of the younger generation in Japan (Morioka M, 2013).

At the beginning of the show, before meeting Mikuri, Hiramasa has very little experience with women, as ccan be illustrated in the following scene from episode 3 **Excerpt: episode 3, 9:35-**

In this scene, Mikuri is talking on the phone with Tsuzaki's mother, who asks, "Are things going well with Hiramasa?" Mikuri responds, "Yes, very well," which prompts Tsuzaki's mother to share her thoughts on her son. She notes, "He doesn't have the best social graces, but he has a kind heart. Please take care of him." She expresses her concern, stating, "I thought he'd grow old without ever having a girlfriend. I was really worried!" Tsuzuki's mothers' concerns about her son's lack of experience with regards to romantic relationships could be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender norms. By expressing her worries about her son possibly getting old without having a girlfriend, it implies that there is something abnormal for a man to be single at this age, thus reinforcing the social ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, actively pursuing women is one of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, as opposed to alternative masculinities such as herbivore men, who show little interest in pursuing

the opposite sex (Fukasawa, 2009). This scene puts an emphasis on persisting social expectations that place an importance on hegemonic masculinity especially among the older generation such as Tsuzuki's mother.

In *Nigeru wa Haji*, Hiramasa's initial awkwardness around Mikuri and his lack of experience with women can be interpreted as a critique of herbivore men while maybe at the same time praising traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity. Hiramasa embodies traits associated with herbivore men—he is gentle, shy, and somewhat hesitant in expressing his feelings, which contrasts sharply with the more dominant, assertive behaviours often celebrated in traditional masculinity. His struggles with social interactions and romantic advances can be seen as a form of ridicule towards herbivore men, emphasizing their perceived shortcomings in handling relationships.

At the same time, the show seems to support a more conventional masculinity through the character's eventual growth and development. Hiramasa's journey toward forming a partnership with Mikuri ultimately suggests that while softer masculinity has its merits, there remains a societal expectation for men to display confidence and decisiveness in relationships, traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately, the show appears to put an emphasis the superiority of hegemonic masculinity in comparison to alternative masculinities.

Furthermore, in *Nigeru wa Haji*, there is praise for men who express affection and show their emotions. While masculinity in Japan is often associated with hiding true feelings and emotional restraint, the series celebrates those who challenge these norms. In Episode 5 **Episode 5 (5:37)**, Hiramasa reflects on his lack of physical affection, stating, "I've had too few hugs. I remember my mother cuddling me when I was a child. But in all my 35 years of life, I've never hugged anyone other than my family." In response, Mikuri explains that in other cultures, hugging is a common way to express affection, saying, "In other countries, they hug just to say hello. You can hug friends and family. The hug is the easiest and greatest way to show affection." This scene sheds light on different ways to express intimacy. Hiramasas comment about remembering his mother cuddling him when he was a young child is reflective of traditional relationships between parents and children in Japan. In Japan, social norms from the past continue to have an impact on the role of mothers and fathers in childrearing. Many Japanese people believe that a child who is not raised by their mother during the initial three years of life might face difficulties, leading to women being less willing to pursue work after birth. Skinship, or "intimacy through touch" also plays a significant role in Japanese family life. While such as is the case for Tsuzaki, it is most common for children to experience physical

contact with their mothers, shifting parenting roles have resulted in greater involvement and expectations of fathers to be more emotionally involved in their children.

In this scene, Mikuri introduces a cross-cultural view of intimacy. By watching the drama in its entirety, we know that Mikuri's comment on hugs being simply a way to greet friends and family in other countries is her way to suggest that she and Hirasama start expressing their affection through a ritual "hug." This is reflective of the fact that new ways to express love and affection have emerged in the recent decades (Alexy, 2020). Alexy (2020) argues that the importance of verbally communication their affection and love indicates a shift in the way spouses approach their relationships. While in the past it was more common to express affection through the fusion of the bodies (ittai) rather verbal communication, nowadays communication is seen to be very important in healthy relationships. Alexy (2020) calls this model for intimacy "connected independence", in which couples strive to be connected through their love and affection rather than the gendered labour system, as opposed to "disconnected dependence". Hugging, while being a physical act, is also a way to expressly communicate your feelings of affection to your partner. In this way, *Nigeru wa Haji* portrays masculinity in a way that encourages emotional openness and affection, as seen through Hiramasa's character. By embracing hugs and physical touch, Hiramasa moves away from traditional expectations of men in Japan, who are often expected to be stoic and emotionally reserved to fit into the mold of "hegemonic masculinity." Mikuri's suggestion for Hiramasa to express his feelings through hugs emphasizes a shift in how intimacy is understood and practiced in relationships today.

4. Social media comments regarding masculinity and LGBT representation

Nigeru wa haji (or *Nigehaji*) might not focus directly on same-sex relationships, but it does feature a subplot with male gay characters that has sparked a lot of conversation online. Many comments I've gathered from social media and forums reflect people's thoughts on how the show represents LGBT themes. Viewers seem to appreciate the inclusion of these characters, but there's also criticism about how they fit into the bigger picture of societal issues. These discussions reveal a lot about contemporary attitudes toward masculinity and acceptance in Japan, showing that while the show offers an idealized view of modern life, it also emphasizes some ongoing challenges in how different identities are portrayed and accepted.

Comment 4 ("I just finished watching Runaway Shame and it smells preachy. And gay people are always treated like a story in Japanese dramas.") suggests that the portrayal of LGBT individuals in the drama is often superficial and lacks depth, with gay characters being treated as plot devices or comedic elements. This comment criticises the drama for not handling gay

characters in a more subtle way. Here it is relevant to mention a trend that developed from the 2010s onwards, the “hypervisibility “(Maree 2018, 200) of LGBT and queer identities in the mainstream media. Suganuma (2018) argues that queer representations have been used to entertain the audience as well as reestablish heteronormativity. While sexual minorities have become more visible to the public eye, there is still progressed to be made in terms of public acceptance and legal rights (Maree, 2017).

Comments 3, 5, 6 and 7 all revolve around the broader topic of LGBTQ+ representation and acceptance in society. Comment 3 (“I wish "you don't know a person's sexuality until they tell you themselves" was the standard in Japan, straight, gay, whatever”.) expresses a wish for people to show more respect towards individuals' sexualities. Comments 5 (“Numata-san is not gay. Numata-san is Numata-san.”) and 6 (It's not about sex, it's about respect as a person.) suggests that people's identities should not be limited to their sexualities, and that everyone should feel respected regardless of their sexual orientation. Comment 7 (“I think this is a common concept that we should have not only for same-sex marriage, which is a hot topic today, but also for people of different countries, regions, skin colours, and disabilities.”) expands on these ideas, suggesting that respect and acceptance should extend to all aspects of diversity, including nationality, ethnicity, skin colour, and disabilities, not only LGBTQ+ community.

Overall, these comments encourage more understanding and respect towards LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized groups in society. Greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community can in part be attributed to their heightened visibility in popular media, such as dramas. According to Gerbner and his colleagues, people's perceptions of social reality is reflective of what they see on television, and watching television on a regular basis contributes to “Mainstreaming “or homogenization of their view of the real world (Gerbner et al., 2000). Morgan claimed that “people who spend great amounts of time watching television are likely to be exposed to a more centralized, consistent, standardized ideology and worldview; hence, they should be more like each other that like the members of their groups who watch less” (p.244). While not everything that was quoted here can be applied to the drama in question, greater representation of various sexualities in Japanners dramas has most certainly contributed to more acceptance towards them.

5. The idealistic portrayal in *Nigeru wa haji*：social media comments

In looking at comments from social media and online forums about *Nigeru wa haji* (or *Nigehaji*), I noticed a clear picture of its idealized portrayal of masculinity and contemporary issues in Japan comes into focus. While many viewers appreciate the drama's attempts at emphasizing LGBT representation and gender equality, there's also a notable critique regarding its failure to address more serious societal problems like poverty and traditional gender roles. The comments reflect a longing for a society where these progressive ideas are seen as the norm, which emphasises a disconnect between the drama's idealism and the realities that many people face in Japan. This contrast raises important questions about how *Nigehaji* portrays masculinity as well as what it might mean for the future of social change in Japan.

Comment 1:

> I think the reason "Runaway Shame" deals with social issues but does not touch on poverty is because it is a modern trendy drama. Working in the city, living in a beautiful apartment, having a magical gay friend, a decent family, maternity leave for both men and women... I think this is the ideal life that TV stations can show as best they can in the age of 2022.

This comment suggest that the drama is too idealistic and does while it does touch upon certain social issues, it bypasses more serious ones such as poverty. This is reflective of what Painter (1993) argues: while TV dramas tend to discuss issues that are seen as social problems as the main aim of the broadcasting stations is to generate profits (Scherer et al., 2016), they cannot be overly critical (Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum, 2015). TV dramas cannot be viewed as a reflection of society or as a way to give advice to individual viewers, therefore they are unlikely to directly result in social change (Hu, 2005). The unrealistic portrayal of modern daily life in Japanese dramas is thus quite common and aligns with what is expressed by this commentator. As this comment argues, the dramas depiction of modern daily life is quite unrealistic and is not necessarily reflective of the average life of a Japanese person.

Comment 2:

> I hope that this drama will not be popular, and that Japanese society will not be moved by this drama. I want to create a society where people say, "Married couples have separate surnames, maternity leave, power harassment, LGBT, the definition of "mainstay," etc., are all commonplace, so why is this a drama?" I want to create a society where people say, "That's normal!

Much like comment 1, Comment two also suggests an idealistic of certain aspects of contemporary Japan. This commentator expresses his or her wish that things such as separate surnames and maternity leave become commonplace enough in Japan that people are not surprised when watching dramas such as *Nigeru wa haji*. This suggests that issues concerning separate surnames and LGBT are still common in Japan. Indeed, in Japan, it is still expected that women should take their husbands name upon marriage, and if they do not, they may face stigmatization and a certain pressure to do so. In the same way, while homosexual romance has become more widespread in Japanese television shows, is has not necessarily resulted in more acceptance of these kind of relationships, especially among the older generation. Moreover, the comment suggests that the term *daikokubashira* is still understood in a very traditional way. The term *Daikokunashira* refers to the wooden pillar that is placed in the middle of traditional wooden Japanese houses that enable the structure to hold together (Roberson&Suzuki, 2005). *Diakokubashira* also refers to the male breadwinner and is a central component of Japanese hegemonic masculinity. The fact that the term "daikokubashira" is still used today to describe men with families shows that men are still expected to be the central person supporting the family (Dalton & Dales, 2016). The drama *Nigeru wa haji* introduces many modern and progressive concepts that this commentator wishes were normalized in Japanese contemporary society. According to Kelly Hu et al, who refers to Anthony's concept of self-reflexivity (2007), TV dramas can help their audience to make choices about their lives: "Individuals will ask themselves questions about everything from lifestyles and relationships to body image and self-therapy. Japanese TV dramas present a multitude of associated questions with choices acted out for the viewers." (Hu et al., 2007). By tackling on a variety of social issues and presenting its audience with different ways of thinking and living, the drama can also potentially encourage self-reflection amongst its audience.

6.3 Analysis theme 3: Workplace and social representation

1. The representation of working women in *Nigeru wa haji*

In Japan, a significant gender gap persists in the workplace, and *Nigeru wa Haji* emphasizes this through several scenes. For example, in one scene (**Episode 3, 18 : 55－**), Mikuri's aunt shares a drink with her college friend, Yoshiko, and their conversation touches on gender disparities in the workplace. Yoshiko remarks, "I didn't think you'd still be single, Tsuchiya," to which she replies, "I wish I could go back and warn myself." Reflecting on their career progression, Yoshiko notes, "To think we'd reunite as department heads," but Mikuri's aunt corrects him: "I'm just a deputy department head. Even though women make up 70 percent of

the company, only 10 percent are in management positions. It’s pretty lonely." Mikuri's aunt's claim that she is one of the few women in management positions challenges gender stereotypes by drawing attention to the disparity and underrepresentation of women in corporate leadership roles. This questions the notion that women belong in supporting roles and that men are better suited for positions of control and power. Indeed, corporate practices are at the heart of gender inequality in the Japanese employment system. The low proportion of female managers indicates that there are significant barriers limiting gender equality, including biases in hiring practices, promotion opportunities, and workplace culture. These barriers manifest as prejudice against women, such as stereotypes that question their leadership capabilities, assumptions about their commitment to work due to family responsibilities, and a lack of mentorship and support in advancing their careers (Aronsson 2015). The corporate practices that began during the post war years continue to have an impact on the employment of men and women. While there is only a little proportion of female workers in the main career track, temporary female workers are common (Nemoto 2016). The practice of tracking leads to unintentional discrimination: educated women are faced with a “gender order in the workplace” that is demotivating and limits their satisfaction at work. Yoshiko and Mikuri's aunt's conversation illuminates the gender dynamics in the workplace, where women encounter obstacles to promotion even though they make up most of the employees. This goes against the established gender conventions that restrict women to lesser jobs and less prospects for professional growth. Mikuri's aunt's feelings of loneliness as deputy department head may show the isolation women often experience in male-dominated workplaces. This situation reflects societal expectations that discourage women from expressing their discomfort and push them to endure tough working conditions. Additionally, it could point out to how women are seen as emotionally vulnerable, which can reinforce stereotypes that diminish their professional abilities. What the character is feeling points out not only to personal struggle Japanese women face but also to broader barriers that contribute to their feelings of isolation at work. This goes against the conventional gender norm, which says that women should adjust to situations where men predominate without voicing their discomfort.

This scene emphasises the ongoing fight for gender equality in the workplace and the necessity of removing structural obstacles that prevent women from advancing in their careers within a post-feminist framework. It emphasises how important it is to question established gender stereotypes and fight for more women to be represented in leadership roles.

Nigeru wa haji also addresses topics like maternity leave and women's roles in corporate environments, as seen in scenes where characters, like Tsuchiya, push back against restrictive views and encourage a more open-minded perspective on women's choices. In this scene (**Excerpt, episode 8, 12:29-12:53**), Tsuchiya responds to her younger colleagues' frustration over a female colleague taking maternity leave, pushing back against their negative view. When they express that her absence is an "inconvenience," Tsuchiya responds, "Don't say that" showing her support for maternity leave. She explains her perspective directly to the audience: "Appreciation (感謝=kansha)." When her colleagues' question this, she thanks women on leave, saying, "Thank you for giving birth in my place," showing respect for their role in society. Tsuchiya dismisses societal expectations that dictate women's choices: "Ignore that noise...we are working. We are paying our taxes," encouraging her colleagues to appreciate welfare policies like maternity leave, which support diverse life choices. This scene challenges traditional gender norms and aligns within a post-feminist framework. Firstly, Tsuchiya rejects her colleagues' conventional views according to which women who take maternity leave are a burden on the company. Instead, she expresses gratitude towards them and valuable contribution to society. In addition, Tsuchiya challenges traditional gender norms by dismissing societal expectations that dictates the life path women ought to take, which is in general getting married and having children. Tsuchiya encourages her colleagues to ignore societal pressure and focus on how they are contributing to the workforce. As Tsuchiya expresses her own views on maternity leave and encouraging her colleagues to reject conventional societal norms that limit women's choices, this scene reflects post-feminist ideals to empowerment, individual agency, and choice.

The gender gap in the workplace is also embodied in the main female protagonist Mikuri. At the beginning of the series, Mikuri's initial pursuit of a job in planning or new product design challenges traditional gender norms, because these fields are in general associated with STEM disciplines, which have been dominated by men throughout history. This contradicts the expectation that women should pursue careers in caregiving or social science. Societal biases or prejudice might have been at the root of Mikuri's inability to find a job in her chosen field. Discrimination based on gender or unequal opportunities in the hiring process may also have contributed to Mikuri's difficulty finding the job she wanted.

Moreover, At the beginning of the series, where Mikuri is working as a temporary worker doing administrative work, her willingness to take on duties like cleaning that aren't included her contract emphasizes how gendered expectations are accepted in the workplace. Women are

frequently assigned caring or cleaning responsibilities despite their potential overqualification, which perpetuates discrimination based on gender. Indeed, everyday practices related to "performance" and "promotion" also contribute to gender inequality in the workplace (Shire 2000). Each gender is based on differing criteria in the workplace. Women are judged on appearance, attitude, and manners, while men are evaluated on their analysis and decision-making skills (Shire 2000). Moreover, the way in which men and women's workplaces are situated (spatial positioning) suggests a male centred hierarchy (Macnaughten, 2015). In addition, tasks that require a prominent level of competence are often assigned to men instead of women. This tendency reflects the preconceived notion that men are inherently more competent than women, rather than being based on actual abilities or qualifications. Such biases not only limit women's opportunities for advancement but also perpetuate stereotypes that suggest women are less capable in high-stakes roles (Macnaughten, 2015).

After losing her temp job, Mikuri takes on a housekeeping role for the male protagonist, where she finds herself more fulfilled than she was in her previous company position. Her newfound satisfaction raises questions about the show's stance on gender norms, as it could imply that women find greater contentment in traditional, domestic roles. This portrayal opens a discussion on whether *Nigeru wa Haji* subtly reinforces gender stereotypes by suggesting that women may be "better suited" and happier in domestic rather than corporate environments. In one scene (**Excerpt, episode three**, 36:19-36:35), Hiramasa compliments Mikuri for her housework. Mikuri reflects to herself that "That just now, is probably the most Ive been praised as an employee." This scene can be seen as reinforcing gender stereotypes even if Mikuri is being compensated for her cleaning services. Hirasamas' compliments about her housework uphold the gender norm that assigns women to the duty of primary carers and housekeepers in the home. Furthermore, Mikuri's inner monologue on Hiramasa's praise being the greatest she has ever received from an employer emphasises how little respect she receives for her professional capabilities compared to her home ones. It's true that Mikuri's first job experience was not particularly pleasant, and she didn't feel valued by her supervisor or coworkers. This reinforces the traditional gender norm that places a higher priority on women's household roles and devalues their contributions in the workplace. Thus, this scene can be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender roles by prioritizing and praising women's domestic skills, while at the same time downplaying their professional achievements.

Although this drama is quite progressive in that it reflects the importance of housework and that housewives should receive more recognition for their hard work, it also in a way reflects

traditional gender norms. Mikuri is constantly praised for her hard work as a housekeeper as well as her excellent cooking skills. The drama represents the social ideal of a housewife and the salaryman of post-war Japan. In episode two when two of Tsuzaki's colleagues come to visit the couple, Mikuri prepares a whole table of delicious food and is praised for her hard work by Tsuzuaki's colleagues. Moreover, Tsuzaki's colleagues Ryota's words "You have a lot of merit as a wife" may be seen as discriminating to some, even though after seeing the slightly insulted expression on Mikuri's 's face, he quickly adds "These are words of praise." The "merits" Tsuzaki is talking about amongst other things of course, her cooking skills. Mikuri also makes her husband's bento. The "bento," which is a packed lunch, symbolises in Japan a wife's or a girlfriend's devotion and love for her husband or boyfriend. Although this is of course her job as a housekeeper, it nonetheless reflects the idea of the ideal housewife. In Japanese society, although some men are starting, bento-making is commonly perceived as being a feminine job. This is reflected through the use of expressions related to a homemade "bento": "aisai bento" (loving-wife bento) and "mama bento" (mother's bento). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the principles of katei ryori (home cooking), in other words "hygiene/nourishment, economy, convenience, novelty", were established. Housewives were expected to follow these principles and are still expected to do so today (Cwiertka, 2006, p. 100). According to Anne Allison (1991, p. 203), bento is "a representation and product of the woman herself". Mothers are judged by schoolteachers and their children's classmates through the bento that they make. A mother is thus expected to prepare a bento for her child/husband, that is not only nutritious but also pleasing to the eyes. The "bento" as a reflection of a women's value as a housewife is poetry ed in this drama: In episode three, as she is eating her "bento" with her best friend, she is concerned about the taste of the bento that she has made for Tsuzaki: "It's not bad, but it's not good either. Kind of hard to describe."

In *Nigeru wa haji*, gender roles of men and women are reinforced is Tsuzaki's cluelessness about cooking and housekeeping contrasted to Mikuri's expertise and knowledge about the matter. In episode three, Mikuri buys a new rice-cooker, which she uses to cook dinner for herself and Tsuzaki. As they are enjoying the home-made meal that night, Tsuzaki asked Mikuri whether she has bought a new rice cooker yet, to which Mikuri replies "Yes, that's how I made that mixed rice (炊き込みご飯炊 takikomigohan), to which Tsuzaki lets out a "ah" of surprise. Mikuri then proceeds to give him a detailed description of the new rice cooker: "It's an induced heat rice cooker that costs 20,000 yen. I made sure it has the minimum functionality and is easy to use. This demonstrates one of the essential qualities of a housewife: managing the household

budget (although she is tsuzaki's homekeeper, it nonetheless reflects gender roles ingrained in Japanese society). Tsuzaki then applies this situation to his own field of expertise, engineering: "That's great. It's like if you buy a computer for the specs and only use it to surf the web, it's useless. And it's not like cheap is better either." This reflects the male breadwinner model, where the man is devoted to his company and his job, while the housewife concentrates on homemaking and cooking.

2. Social media comments relating to workplace

A few comments I found on online Japanese forums as well as twitter related specifically to the theme women and the workplace. The portrayal of corporate practices in *Nigehaji* seems to strike a chord with viewers, who see elements of Japan's real employment landscape reflected in the drama and suggests that the portrayal of corporate practices in the drama is quite realistic. For instance, **Comment 8** expresses surprise and disbelief at the main character's life trajectory, questioning the reality that a woman with a graduate degree would lose a temporary job and must turn to housecleaning:

> **Comment 8**
>
> Running Away is Shameful but Useful, I just watched the first episode and the woman in graduate school got fired from her temp job as well, and now she's doing housework for real?

While comment 8 could point out to the unrealistic life trajectory of the main character, it at the same time does not deny the reality of the situation and expresses surprise and disbelief at the fact that the female heroine, despite having attended graduate school, lost her temporary job and started a job as a home cleaner.

In the same way, Comment 9 ("It's hard to watch *Nigehaji* when the character is still just a dispatched employee with a graduate degree.") and 11 puts an emphasis on the difficulty of watching a drama where the main character, despite having a master's degree, works a temporary job, which in way acknowledges the reality of the employment situation in Japan. The comment points out to the gendered segregation of employment in Japan that emerged after the second world war and is still deeply rooted today (Assmann 2012, Macnaughten 2015). While women labour participation rate is now equal of that of other developed countries, the fact remains thar Japan ranked 114 out of 144 nations in terms of Gender Equality (WEF 2017). This can be explained by the fact that mechanisms supporting the male breadwinner

model are still in place, such as the spousal tax system that makes it more profitable for women to spend most of their time on household chores (Saito, Macnaughten 2015).

Comment 10

Glancing at the recorded episode of *Nigehaji* beside my husband. I remember when we first got married, someone at work said to me, 'You do understand, don't you? Don't have children, okay? You know it'll disrupt your work, right?' Even as a dispatched employee, that's the treatment I received. Maternity leave is out of the question, and having a child is already a high hurdle.

Comment 11

Re-watching the drama *Nigehaji*. At the beginning, it really hits home. Going to a graduate school in the humanities due to difficulty finding employment, then facing job scarcity again, being laid off as a dispatched employee... Japan is scary.

Furthermore, Comment 10 points out to the gendered treatment of men and women in the workplace. Indeed, corporate practices are at the heart of gender inequality in the employment system. The low proportion of female managers in Japan show that there are barriers impeding gender equality and that women are the victims of prejudice in the workplace (Aronsson 2015). The corporate practices that began during the post-war years are still present today and still have an impact on the employment of men and women. While there is a little proportion of female workers in the main career track, temporary female workers are common (Nemoto 2016). The practice of tracking leads to unintentional discrimination: education women are faced with a “gender order in the workplace” that is demotivating and limits their satisfaction at work. In addition, everyday practices related to “performance” and “promotion” also contribute to gender inequality in the workplace (Shire 2000). For example, the way in which men and women's workspace are placed in the workplace (spatial positioning) suggests a male cantered hierarchy and tacitly conveys to women that they are expected to stop working were they to get married (Macnaughten, 2015).

In summary, I think these comments illustrate how viewers relate to the character’s experiences, emphasizing the institutional gender disparities that women encounter in Japan.

7 FINDINGS AND RESULTS

7.1 cultivation theory and *Nigeru wa haji*: audience reactions from social media

Cultivation theory is an important part of studies that analyse how television impacts individuals view on society (Saito, 2007). According to Gerbner and colleagues, the phenomenon of "mainstreaming" is used to describe the fact that individual's views and perspectives converge, that is to say that they become similar, to that of the characters views and perspectives in popular television shows (Gerbner et al., 2000; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Morgan (1990) asserted that individuals who spend significant amounts of time watching television are likely to be exposed to a standardized ideology and worldview, leading to increased similarity among viewers compared to those who watch less television (p. 244).

Gerbner's concept of "mainstreaming" of individuals perspectives associated with frequent watching of television can be applied to the drama *Nigeru wa haji*. For example, from 2010s onwards, LGBT, and queer identities have received a lot of attention on the mainstream media. This "hypervisibility" (Maree 2018, 200) has been used not only to entertain the audience but also to reestablish heteronormativity, according to Suganuma (2018). The acceptance of LGBT individual's is an importance element of the show *Nigeru wa haji*. The representation of these people in shows like *Nigeru wa haji* may increase acceptance towards LGBT individuals, as can be seen by the audience reactions of the show: the comment on social media regarding LGBT issues were very open-minded and progressive, encouraging more understanding and respect towards sexual minorities as well as other marginalized groups. Greater representation of LGBT relationships in Japanese dramas have contributed to Japanese people, especially the younger generation, to be more accepting towards them.

The mainstreaming of individuals perspectives when exposed to the same television shows can be applied not only to LGBT relationships, but also perspectives regarding marriage. The show *Nigeru wa haji* deviates from the traditional institution of marriage and puts forth the benefits of entering a common-law marriage. Many comments on social media expressed the idea that the show may have contributed to more acceptance of common-law marriage amongst the Japanese. Many commentators expressed how common-law marriage may be a better choice than a traditional marriage. However, some comments expressed the idea that among the older generation, the idea of a common-law marriage remain strange and unacceptable. Traditional views regarding marriage remains traditional for the older generations. Many comments also

praise the way in which the show is very progressive and "innovative" in the way that it depicts a genderless society, with separate surnames for married couples and same-sex marriage.

Cultivation theory scholars argued that television perpetuates traditional gender roles, depicting women in subordinate positions while portraying men as powerful figures across various domains of society (Shanahan and Morgan, 1999, p. 96). I argue that this theory is relevant to the "who" in question: in the show, not only the female protagonist but also other minor female characters are seen in lower position than the men. For example, Mikuri's employment as Tsuzuki's housekeeper; or the financial and emotional hardships Mikuri's best friend faces when she decides to divorce her husband who has cheated on her; Tsuchiya and the way dismissive and condescending way her male colleagues address her on a few occasions in the drama. Research indicates that women on Japanese television are often portrayed in traditional and stereotypical roles, both in dramas and commercials (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2000; Furnham & Bitar, 2019; Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, & Berkowitz, 1996). Iwao (1993) analysed drama programs from 1977 to 1994 and found that women were frequently underrepresented, with female characters typically depicted as younger than their male counterparts, which reinforces traditional gender roles in Japanese society In *Nigeru wa haji*, contrary to older TV shows, we cannot say that there is an underrepresentation of women in the show, as there is a wide range of different female characters all facing their own struggles; however, the main female protagonist is indeed much younger that the male protagonist, thus emphasising the important of youthfulness in Japanese society, which is in line with Iwao's research mentioned above.

Thus, as we can see there are many similarities between the way women were portrayed in earlier years and the way women are represented in the show *Nigeru wa haji*. While the male protagonist is a respected, well-paid salaryman, the female protagonist, on a surface level, is portrayed in a traditional and stereotypical manner. The main female character is also considerably younger that her male counterpart. My findings suggest that comments on social media reflect the show's role in reflecting and reinforcing the gender gap in Japan. I argue that this reaction from viewers demonstrates an awareness of how media can both depict and perpetuate societal inequalities.

Japan ranked 110 out of 149 countries in the Global Gender Gap report in 2018, which emphasizes its elevated level of gender inequality (World Economic Forum). Japanese women, when they get married, oftentimes continue being employed while at the same time assuming most of the bulk of responsibilities of household chores and child rearing. This is referred to as

the “second shift”: where wives take on most of the responsibilities relating to housework and child raising (Kan and Hertog 2017). Iwao's (1993) research emphasizes the prevalence of traditional gender roles in Japanese television dramas, where men typically occupy "masculine" jobs while women are often depicted as housewives or in stereotypically "feminine" roles like nightclub workers. Despite some female characters holding "masculine" occupations such as surgeons, the majority engage in household chores, reinforcing traditional gender norms. In the show *Nigeru wa haji*, traditional gender roles are depicted, however we can also see female empowerment, especially through the characters of Tsuchiya and her efforts to climb the corporate ladder to be equal to her male counterparts.

Furthermore, according to the previously mentioned content analysis studies, female characters were commonly portrayed as dependent and emotional, with limited representation of traditionally masculine traits like intelligence and courage. This portrayal extends beyond television dramas to educational programs and television advertisements. During my analysis, I found that this is certainly the case in the drama *Nigeru wa haji*, where Mikuri is dependant on Tzuzaki through her job as his housekeeper, despite having entered a contract marriage. On the one hand, I found through my analysis that Mikuri frequently displays emotional traits commonly associated with Japanese femininity. On the other hand, I witness that Tsuzaki is represented as stable, intelligent man while Mikuri is represented as being very emotional, a little air-headed, cute, hence, “feminine”.

Saito's (2007) findings suggest that television in Japan tends to perpetuate traditional views, potentially hindering social progress. However, Saito also argues that television has played a role in driving societal changes, indicating a strong relationship between television and social dynamics. Saitō’s finding is relevant to the show *Nigeru wa haji* in the way that while the show may perpetuate traditional views in the way it portrays the main female characters in a traditional manner, fulfilling domestic chores for her husband, the show also introduces many “innovative” ideas such as common-law marriage, separate surnames and same-sex marriage. Thus, I argue that audience reactions show that popular media not only depicts but also reinforced societal inequalities.

7.2 *Nigeru wa haji* and and post-feminism

According to McRobbie (2009, 57), post-feminism involves “turning the clock forwards” to achieve a post-feminism gender settlement, in which patriarchal standards are reintroduced in ostensibly new ways and conventional gender dynamics are altered. Thus, due to a process of

"disarticulation," this leads to a twofold movement or entanglement in which feminism is both acknowledged and concurrently undone (McRobbie 2009, 26). Post-feminism, therefore, becomes a potent form of antifeminism, dismantling feminism politics under the guise of acknowledging it, concurrently perpetuating gender inequalities and reinstating patriarchal norms.

The analysis section of this thesis clearly establishes that the process of "disarticulation," in which feminism is both acknowledged and simultaneously undermined, is a key feature of the drama *Nigeru wa Haji*. Indeed, while the drama challenges gender inequalities and traditional gender roles, it also appears to perpetuate gender inequalities to a certain extent.

1. The challenging of gender inequalities and traditional gender norms in the drama *Nigeru wa haji*: feminism acknowledged

In *Nigeru wa haji*, male and female gendered ideals and roles are often challenged, as we have shown in the analysis section earlier. The show challenges traditional ideals: female characters are portrayed as being ambitious, driven and having their own goals in life, especially regarding their career; their only goal in life is not marry a good man raise children. This is in line with post-feminist ideals of female personal responsibility and autonomy (Brown, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014). The drama seeks to spread awareness regarding the lack of recognition of women's unpaid labour, reflecting post–feminist critiques of gendered labour divisions. Indeed, there are still few policies that aim at marketizing women's unpaid domestic work (Macnaughtan, 2015).

My analysis reveals that the drama critically examines the institution of marriage by emphasizing its limitations and questioning its societal value. I argue that the portrayal of characters handling unconventional relationships challenges traditional views of marriage and its supposed benefits. More concretely, these unconventional relationships include the two main protagonists' common law marriage arrangement, and other forms of romantic relationships such as homosexual relationships. Also, a few scenes in the drama show characters directly discussing equally the advantages and disadvantages of marriage, as I have discussed in the analysis section. These findings suggest that the drama invites viewers to reconsider the role of marriage in contemporary society. The reluctance and lack of interest in getting married of many of the characters is reflective of the "flight from marriage "described by Jones (2007). Indeed, in contemporary Japan, young people are more reluctant to get married to the package of gender specific duties and obligations that accompany marriage and are structured and reinforced by the normative and institutional environment (Bumpass et al., 2009). In the drama, I found that marriage is frequently portrayed as a transaction, involving

both gains and losses. For Kazami, a character who strongly opposes marriage, it is a transaction in which he believes the losses outweigh the benefits. Similarly, the common-law partnership between the female and male protagonists is depicted as transactional, as she receives financial compensation for taking on the role of housekeeper. This reluctance to conform to societal standards reflects the post-feminist discourses that prioritize individual choice and autonomy rather than being tied to traditional institutions such as marriage. The is reflective of the notion of post-feminism as an epistemic departure from previous feminist philosophy, where individuals critically examine and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. (Gill 2017).

Moreover, *Nigeru wa Haji* challenges traditional gender roles by presenting a nontraditional approach to marriage through Mikuri and Tsuzaki's common-law marriage agreement. My findings suggest that this arrangement not only emphasizes the benefits of alternative partnerships, such as *jijitsukon*, but also reflects post-feminist perspectives emphasizing individual agency over societal expectations. By portraying the tension between generational ideals, the drama stresses shifting attitudes in Japan, where behaviours once disapproved of are now more accepted, and marriage and childbearing are increasingly viewed as personal choices (Bumpass et al, 2009).

Saito's cultivation theory, particularly the concept of the "mainstreaming of individuals' perspectives" through exposure to the same television show, can be applied here. My analysis of social media discussions emphasised how common-law marriage is often perceived as more beneficial than traditional marriage. I found that many Japanese commentators emphasized the flexibility and individuality offered by common-law arrangements, contrasting them with the perceived constraints of a "normal", traditional marriage. The show's positive portrayal of common law marriage, including progressive ideas like separate surnames, may have contributed to a greater acceptance of this form of marriage, especially among the younger generation in Japan. This aligns with Saito's "mainstreaming theory," suggesting that the show helped shape more open-minded views on the subject. This aligns with Saito's idea that television has played a role in driving societal changes.

In *Nigeru wa haji*, it is not only the main female protagonist that asserts her agency. Mikuri's best friends' decision to divorce despite societal pressure and familial expectations challenges the traditional gender roles that women should endure hardships and sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their families. It also challenges the traditional gender norm that women should be dependent on their husbands for financial and emotional support. Through

my analysis, I argue that Tanaka's decision to divorce embodies a powerful assertion of individual agency and autonomy, aligning closely with post-feminist ideals that prioritize women's right to make independent life choices. In the same way, other female character, such as Tsuchiya, challenges traditional gender norms by dismissing societal expectations that dictate what life path women ought to take, which is in general getting married and having children.

My analysis reveals that the drama challenges traditional gender norms by emphasizing the significant gap in housework time in Japan, even within dual-income families (Tsutsui, 2016). Drawing on my findings, I argue that while men's involvement in household duties has slightly increased over the years—contributing around 13 percent to housework and 20 percent to childcare in 2016 (Kan and Hertog, 2017)—the unequal division of labor remains a persistent issue. The drama emphasizes this imbalance through its portrayal of the stress men face from the expectation to juggle full-time work and household chores (Taga, 2017), while also recognizing the often-overlooked value of unpaid domestic labor.

Through my analysis, I found that *Nigeru wa Haji* aligns with a post-feminist framework by addressing the ongoing fight for gender equality in the workplace. The drama emphasizes how structural obstacles continue to hinder women's career advancement, specifically the underrepresentation of women in managerial and corporate positions. Audience comments further emphasized this issue, accentuating the persistent prejudice women face in the workplace and the continued barriers to achieving gender equality (Aronsson, 2015). My findings suggest that the corporate practices established after World War II still impact the gendered distribution of labor, with women often relegated to temporary roles while men dominate the career track (Nemoto, 2016). These practices contribute to a gender hierarchy that diminishes job satisfaction and motivation for educated women. By spotlighting these challenges, the drama advocates for greater gender equality, particularly in leadership roles, thus supporting post-feminist ideals of dismantling gendered power structures.

Commentators often empathized with Mikuri's struggles to find stable employment, as well as the challenges she faces in her workplace at the beginning of the show. As mentioned in the analysis section of the thesis, some commentators point out the unfair, gendered treatment of men and women in the workplace. On social media, a few comments related with women and their struggles in the workplace, thus supporting Saito's concept of "mainstreaming" within cultivation theory. This could suggest that the drama reflects and amplifies societal perceptions

of gender inequality in the workplace, validating the idea that media exposure can shape viewers' understanding of social realities.

In addition, there is a scene in the drama that challenges the way in which gender is represented in the advertisement industry in Japan. In Japanese society, there is a significant emphasis on valuing women's youthfulness and adherence to the concept of "kawaii" (cuteness). The way in which women are represented in the advertisements can contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes associated with each gender (Oppliger, 2007).

In East Asian cultures like Japan, women often appear in advertisements as younger, dressed in revealing attire, and are for the most part featured in promotions for cosmetics and personal care products (Prieler et al., 2015). The lack of representation of older women in media reinforces the notion that youthfulness very desirable, which contributed to shape societal attitudes (Gerbner et al., 2000). These portrayals tend to sexualize women, contributing to mental health issues such as depression and eating disorders (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Additionally, the association of beauty products with women puts an emphasis on society's emphasis on female attractiveness and perpetuates objectification, leading to negative body image (Dens et al., 2009). According to Bandura (1986), stereotypical depictions in advertising influence perceptions of gender roles, dictating acceptable behaviour (Carter & Steiner, 2003). Being exposed to such stereotypes can deter interest in careers traditionally associated with the opposite gender (Smith & Granados, 2009). Furthermore, the advertising industry is predominantly male dominated in many countries, impacting the portrayal of gender in media (Lauzen et al, 2008).

My analysis emphasizes how *Nigeru wa Haji* portrays female empowerment by challenging entrenched gender norms and expectations. This is particularly evident in a key scene where Tsuchiya criticizes the objectifying and sexualized depiction of women in an advertisement released by her company. She ultimately convinces her male superiors to modify the advertisement, asserting her agency and challenging traditional power dynamics. This scene demonstrates the drama's commitment to addressing societal issues and redefining conventional gender roles.

2. The perpetuation of traditional gender norms in the drama: feminism undone

As I've shown in the analysis section, *Nigeru wa Haji* may seem, on the surface, to challenge gender inequalities and traditional gender norms in Japan. However, my findings reveal that while the drama appears "progressive" in empowering women and questioning gender norms,

the underlying, deeply rooted gender expectations are still very much present. This shows that even though the drama challenges gender inequality, there are still many scenes in which traditional social norms are very much present. I argue that the drama dismantles feminist politics under the guise of acknowledging it, concurrently perpetuating gender inequalities and reinstating patriarchal norms (McRobbie, 2009).

My findings suggest that the female protagonist's initial desire to enter into a "contract marriage" with Tsuzaki is primarily driven by her struggle to secure stable and well-paying employment. By portraying this motivation, the drama not only reflects societal pressures on women to find alternative ways to achieve financial stability but also reinforces the traditional gender norm that women must rely on marriage as a means of economic security. Her contemplation of marriage as an answer to her job-hunting struggles reflect the traditional societal expectation that women should prioritize marriage and family over their careers. The traditional gender norm that dictates that women's main role should revolve around domesticity and caregiving is reflective of post war ideals of "complementary incompetence" where husband and the wife mutually benefit from their union, through the husband being the breadwinner of the family and the women taking on a domestic role. The fact that Mikuri considers marriage as a means of escaping job hunting, she in a way reinforces traditional gender norms that women should financially rely on a male partner. This mirrors the historical expectation that marriage provides financial support to women, making men the breadwinner and women the dependant. Mikuri's contemplation suggests a lack of autonomy in her decision-making process, as to her marriage is simply a way to achieve financial stability rather than a real desire to get married. This strengthens traditional gender norms that restrict women's autonomy and limit their options to fulfil societal expectations, and this idea is rooted in the complementary system that emerged after the second world war, where men were expected to find lifetime employment and women were expected to take on non-regular work to supplement the labour force (Macnaughten 2015). This gendered segregation of employment in Japan is deeply rooted and still exists today (Assman 2012). mechanisms supporting the male breadwinner model still exist, such as the spousal tax system that makes it more profitable for women to spend most of their time doing household chores (Saito 2007; Macnaughten 2015).

Evidence suggests that one of the most apparent ways the drama reinforces traditional gender roles is through the portrayal of the main female protagonist engaging in cooking and house chores. While it is revealed that she is financially compensated for her work, my analysis indicates that the initial impression presented to the audience is that of a woman fulfilling

domestic duties for her husband. This portrayal aligns with the cliched depictions of housework in post-war Japanese television, further reinforcing traditional gender norms. According to Iwao, these representations of gender roles can reinforce and maintain conventional conceptions of gender roles. The drama reinforces gender stereotypes associated with men and women, especially the fact that to attract a partner, women should excel at homemaking tasks. Throughout the entire drama, although the two main characters are in a contract marriage, we are presented with the traditional gender dynamic of "complementary incompetence," where Tsuzaki is perceived as the male breadwinner while Mikuri takes on a more traditional domestic role. Although in reality the arrangement is nontraditional and equitable, what the audience sees is a traditional couple where the man is the provider, and the woman takes care of domestic chores. Mikuri's role is very similar to that of a "traditional" wife as she handles bank transfers and makes homecooked meals. While this will be developed in another section of this thesis, it may be argued that this can reinforce gender role perceptions among the audience, through cultivation theory.

Indeed, the data shows that the portrayal of the female protagonist aligns with Saito's idea that shows may perpetuate traditional views of women's roles. Younger viewers, especially girls, may internalize the notion that a woman's primary role is to be in the household and care for her husband. As mentioned earlier, many comments on social media focused not on the social issues raised by the show but rather on the cuteness of the main female protagonist. This reinforces the idea that the show may be reinforcing conventional gender expectations, rather than challenging them.

It appears that traditional gender perceptions are not only evident in the main female protagonist's consistent engagement in cooking and house chores, but also in the way male characters interact with the female characters. This suggests that the drama reinforces gender roles through both the actions of the female protagonist and the behaviour of the male characters. Mikuri is constantly praised for her hard work as a housekeeper as well as her excellent cooking skills. Ryota tells Mikuri that she has a lot of "merit as a wife," suggesting that one of the highest values for a woman to have is to be skilled at cooking. This reinforced traditional gender norms. The beautiful bentos Mikuri makes for Tsuzaki can also reflects traditional gender roles, in the way that bento is "a representation and product of the woman herself" (Allison, 1991, p. 203). In Japanese society, although some men are starting, bento-making is commonly perceived as being a feminine job. This is reflected using expressions related to a homemade "bento": "aisai bento" (loving-wife bento) and "mama bento" (mother's

bento). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the principles of katei ryori (home cooking), in other words “hygiene/nourishment, economy, convenience, novelty” were established. Housewives were expected to follow these principles and are still expected to do so today (Cwiertka, 2006, p. 100). The “bento” as a reflection of a women’s value as a housewife is poetry in this drama: In episode three, as she is eating her “bento” with her best friend, she is concerned about the taste of the bento that she has made for Tsuzaki: “It’s not bad, but it’s not good either. Kind of hard to describe.”

I believe that the view on marriage expressed by some characters in the show contributes to the perpetuation of traditional gender norms. As seen in the analysis section of this thesis, before the male and female protagonists decide to enter a contract marriage, Tsuzaki suggests that Mikuri take part in konkatsu (marriage hunting). This reflects the societal pressure on women to get married and start a family. In Japan, searching for a marriage partner through “konkatsu” has become a socially accepted activity as more and more people find it difficult to find a marriage partner through their own connections (Nishimura et al., 2022). Moreover, the emphasis on youth and especially the male characters views about female youth in the show also serves to reinforce gender norms. The high value that is placed on the youthfulness of women in Japan is visible in many ways: one example is how Tsuzaki mentions that Mikuri is still “young” and probably will not face any difficulties finding a husband. For Iwao, this tends to reinforce traditional views regarding gender roles.

The value of youthfulness is also reflected in idol culture in Japan, which also tends to reinforce gender norms and ideals (Miller 2011). Youthfulness is linked to “cuteness” (kawaii), which is a highly valued trait in Japanese women. According to Iwao content analysis research of Japanese drama programmes between the 1977 and 1994, male characters tended to be middle aged while female characters were in their twenties. Iwao asserted that this showed the high value that is placed on youthfulness in Japanese society, and this tends to reinforce traditional views regarding gender roles. My findings support the theoretical discussions presented by M. F. Suzuki (1995) and others on the representation of women in Japanese television. In *Nigeru wa haji*, the main female character embodies the ideal of youthfulness and "cuteness"—traits that are highly valued in Japanese society, as highlighted by Suzuki (1995) and further discussed by scholars such as Miller (2011) and Asano-Cavanagh (2014). The portrayal of Mikuri aligns with the concept of kawaii, where her gentleness, refinement, and vulnerability reflect societal expectations of femininity. These traits are not only emphasized by the drama but also underline the pressure for women to objectify themselves and conform to these socially

accepted ideals in order to gain acceptance from the opposite gender (Aoyama and Hartley, 2010). By portraying these attributes in Mikuri, the drama reinforces the broader societal views on gender and femininity in Japan.

Many discussions on Japanese forums and Twitter centered on the "cuteness" and attractiveness of the main female protagonist. This emphasizes the significant value placed on outward appearance and youth in Japanese society. Saito's concept of mainstreaming is once again validated, as both the show's portrayal and the audience's reactions reinforce the societal expectation for Japanese women to be "cute" and feminine. Although I have not included these comments in my thesis to focus on those most relevant to my research, they further accentuate the importance of appearance and youth in shaping perceptions of femininity in Japan. Additionally, I would like to add that, aside from the overwhelming focus on the main female character's cuteness, a significant portion of comments also centered on how well the main female and male characters suited each other. By applying Saito's theory of mainstreaming, it can be argued that the show, through its portrayal of the central characters, reinforces the normalization of heteronormativity and traditional values, as the couple ultimately falls in love with each other.

My research shows that in *Nigeru wa haji*, the main female character is significantly younger than the male protagonist and embodies traditional traits of Japanese femininity, including being "cute," polite, and youthful. This portrayal reinforces the traditional gender ideals that continue to dominate the depiction of women in Japanese media. By focusing on these traits, the drama emphasizes an idealized version of femininity, which reflects long-standing societal expectations. Mikuri's manner of speech is very feminine. Indeed, being divided into feminine and masculine speech, Japanese language may reinforce gender identity, norms, and ideals. Women's language is less direct and not as assertive as male speech using softening ending particles such as "no yo" (Shibamoto Smith 1985). Women tend to use a higher tone and make use of speech patterns that are less forceful and assertive than men (Hiramoto and Wong 2005). From the time when they are children, Japanese boys and girls are expected to speak in a way that is seen as appropriate for their gender. Innocence in women is a trait that is highly valued in Japan and is perpetuated through idol culture. The image of innocence that is expected to be projected by young female idol may be an indicator of how women are objectified through the male gaze (e.g., Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). The fact that Japanese women are expected to speak in a certain way to display femininity can be said to reflect "a skewed power difference, dominant heterosexual values, and the male gaze" (Omori and Ota, 2023). The female

protagonist in *Nigeru wa haji* is unquestionably cute and displays all the traits mentioned above associated with Japanese femininity. Her innocence is also apparent through her actions, thoughts, and manner of speech. While the show challenges some gender norms, such as Tchuchiya's advertisement opposing beauty standards, it still emphasizes female beauty and cuteness. The main charcter, Mikuri, adheres to traditional Japanese beauty ideals.

The study suggests that the portrayal of Tsuchiya as a fifty-year-old unmarried, childless woman in *Nigeru wa Haji* is complex. On one hand, she embodies female empowerment, displaying independence and success in her career. However, the drama also emphasizes the societal challenges she faces because of her unmarried and childless status. These scenes reinforce the expectation in Japanese society that women prioritize marriage and family over personal career aspirations. This dual portrayal reflects the ongoing tension between empowering female autonomy and societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. Her regret over not marrying shows that marriage is still seen as the most desirable and fulfilling path for women in Japanese society This implies that being unmarried by a certain age is perceived strange and abnormal, thus reinforcing the stereotype that women get the most of their worth through marriage.

To conclude, the depiction of gender roles in *Nigeru wa Haji* aligns with McRobbie's concept of "disarticulation," where feminism is both acknowledged and undermined. This reflects post-feminist ideals, as the show dismantles feminist politics while ostensibly recognizing them, perpetuating gender inequalities, and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Cultivation theory also influences this phenomenon, suggesting that frequent television viewing contributes to the homogenization of individuals' perspectives, aligning them with the portrayals seen on screen. As Gerbner et al. propose, this "mainstreaming" effect standardizes viewers' ideologies, reinforcing traditional gender roles in the media. Thus, I conclude that the way gender dynamics are portrayed in *Nigeru wa Haji* reflects both societal influences and the impact of media consumption on individuals' perceptions of social reality.

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abe, A. and Oishi, A., 2005. Boshi setai no keizai jokyo to shakai hosho. *Economic well-being of single-mother households and social security system). In NIPSSR (ed.), Kosodate Setai no Shakai Hosho (Social Security for the Households with Children). Tokyo University Press, Tokyo*.

Abe, Y. (2013) 'Long-term impacts of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in Japan', *Japan Labor Review*, 10(2), pp. 20–34.

Akaishi, C., 2014. Hitorioya katei (Single Parent Households). Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho

Alexy, A. (2020) *Intimate Disconnections*. University of Chicago Press.

Allison, A. (1991) 'Japanese Mothers and Obentōs: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 64(4), 195–208.

Allison, A., 2014. *Precarious Japan*. Duke University Press.

Anthony Giddens, G. (2013) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Polity Press.

Arima, A. N. (2003) 'Gender stereotypes in Japanese television advertisements', *Sex Roles*, 49(1–2), 81–90.

Aronsson, A. S. (2015) *Career women in contemporary Japan: pursuing identities, fashioning lives*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.

Aoyama, T. & Hartley, B. (2010) *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*. 1st edition. [Online]. Oxford: Routledge.

Aoyama, T. et al. (2015) *Configurations of family in contemporary Japan*. 1st ed. [Online]. Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge.

Asahi Shimbun (2024) 'Japan activists demand dual-surname option on Women's Day', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 8 March. Available at: https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14857297 (Accessed: 2 February 2025).

Asahi Shimbun (2021). 'テレビドラマ『逃げるは恥だが役に立つ』の成功要因とは'. AERA dot. [online] Available at: https://dot.asahi.com/articles/-/96370?page=4 [Accessed 8 February 2025].

Assmann, S. (2012) '25 Years After the Enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL): Online Access to Gender Equality in Japan', *Asian Politics & Policy*, 4(2), pp. 280–285.

Asano-Cavanagh, Y. (2014) 'Linguistic manifestation of gender reinforcement through the use of the Japanese term kawaii', *Gender and Language*, 8(3), 341–359.

Bandura, A. (1986) *Social foundations of thought and action : a social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall.

Barnett, J.M., 2002, November. Benjamin Crabtree & William Miller (Eds.)(1999). Doing Qualitative Research. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Vol. 3, No. 4).

Belarmino, M. & Roberts, M. R. (2019) 'Japanese gender role expectations and attitudes: A qualitative analysis of gender inequality', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7), 272–288.

Berry, C. et al. (eds.) (2017) *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Bobrowska, S. & Conrad, H. (2017) Discourses of Female Entrepreneurship in the Japanese Business Press - 25 Years and Little Progress. *Japanese studies*. [Online] 37 (1), 1–22.

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Brinton, M.C., 2010. *Lost in transition: Youth, work, and instability in postindustrial Japan*. Cambridge University Press.

Brinton, M. C. & Nagase, N. (2017) The gender division of labor and second births: Labor market institutions and fertility in Japan. *Demographic research*. [Online] 36 (36, Art. 11), 339–370.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*

Braun, V. and **Clarke, V.** (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Braun, V. et al. (2022) 'A starting point for your journey, not a map': Nikki Hayfield in conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 19(2), pp. 424–445. [Online].

Bretl, D. J. & Cantor, J. (1988) The portrayal of men and women in U.S. television commercials: A recent content analysis and trends over 15 years. *Sex roles*. [Online] 18 (9–

10), 595–609.

Brown, A. (2009) *Personal Responsibility: Why It Matters*. 1st edition. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Bumpass et al. (2003) 'Attitudes Relating to Marriage and Family Life', in *Marriage, Work, and Family Life in Comparative Perspective*. University of Hawaii Press. pp. 19-.

Bumpass, L. L. et al. (2009) THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF LOW FERTILITY: The case of Japan. *Asian population studies*. [Online] 5 (3), 215–235.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Byrne, D. (2022) 'A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis', *Quality & Quantity*, 56(3), pp. 1391–1412. [Online].

Butler, J. (1999) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. 10th anniversary edition. New York: Routledge. [Online].

Carter, C. and Steiner, L., 2003. *Critical readings: Media and gender*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Caudill, W. and Plath, D., 1966. "Who Sleeps by Whom? Parent-Child Involvement in Urban Japanese Families." Psychiatry, 29(4)

Cavallaro, D. (2013). Japanese aesthetics and anime: The influence of tradition. McFarland.

Charlebois, J. (2013) Japanese Femininities. Abingdon: Routledge

Chiang, H.-Y. & Ohtake, F. (2014) Performance-pay and the gender wage gap in Japan. *Journal of the Japanese and international economies*. [Online] 3471–88.

Clark, R. (1979) *The Japanese company*. New Haven, Conn: Yale UP.

Coates, J., et al. (2020) *The Routledge companion to gender and Japanese culture*. London: Routledge.

Cook, E.E., (2016). *Reconstructing Adult Masculinities: Part-Time Work in Contemporary Japan*. London: Routledge.

Cook, E.E., (2017). Aspirational labour, performativity and masculinities in the making in Japan. *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*

Cwiertka, K.J. (2006) *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*. London: Reaktion Books

Dalton, E. (2017) Womenomics, 'Equality' and Abe's Neo-liberal Strategy to Make Japanese Women Shine. *Social science Japan journal*. [Online] 20 (1), 95–105.

Dalton, E. & Dales, L. (2016) Online Konkatsu and the Gendered Ideals of Marriage in Contemporary Japan. *Japanese studies*. [Online] 36 (1), 1–19.

Dasgupta, R., 2000. Performing masculinities? The 'salaryman'at work and play. *Japanese studies*, *20*(2), pp.189-200.

Dasgupta, R. (2013) *Re-reading the salaryman in Japan : crafting masculinities*. [Online]. New York: Routledge.

Deaux, K. et al. (1987) Putting Gender Into Context: An Interactive Model of Gender-Related Behavior. *Psychological review*. [Online] 94 (3), 369–389.

Dens, N., De Pelsmacker, P., & Janssens, W. (2009). Effects of scarcely dressed models in advertising on body esteem for Belgian men and women. Sex Roles.

DeSantis, L. & Ugarriza, D. N. (2000) The Concept of Theme as Used in Qualitative Nursing Research. *Western journal of nursing research*. [Online] 22 (3), 351–372.

Edwards, W., (1989). Modern Japan Through Its Weddings: Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Erickson-Schroth, L., Gilbert, M.A. & Smith, T.E. (2014) 'Sex and gender development', in Trans bodies, trans selves: A resource for the transgender community. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 80-101.

Estevez-Abe, M. (2013) An International Comparison of Gender Equality: Why Is the Japanese Gender Gap So Persistent? *Japan labor review*. 10 (2), 82–100.

Faludi, S. (2009). Backlash: The undeclared war against American women. New York: Crown.

Fixmer-Oraiz, N. & Wood, J.T. (2017) Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture. 13th edn. Boston, MA: Cengage.

Fredrickson, B.L. and Roberts, T.A., 1997. Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of women quarterly*, *21*(2), pp.173-206.

Friedan, B. (2013) *The feminine mystique: 50 years*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company

Fujiwara, C., (2008). Single mothers and welfare restructuring in Japan: Gender and class dimensions of income and employment. The Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, 6(1)

Fukasawa, M., (2009). Sôshokukei Danshi no Sedai [The Herbivore Generation]. Tokyo: Kobunsha.

Fullerton, J. A. & Kendrick, A. (2000) Portrayal of Men and Women in U.S. Spanish-Language Television Commercials. *Journalism & mass communication quarterly*. [Online] 77 (1), 128–142.

Furnham, A. & Lay, A. (2019). 'The universality of the portrayal of gender in television advertisements: A review of the studies this century'. Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 8(2), pp. 109-121.

Galbraith, P. W. et al. (2015) 'Otaku sexuality in Japan', in *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia*. 1st edition [Online]. Routledge. pp. 205–217.

Ganahl, D. J. et al. (2003) A Content Analysis of Prime Time Commercials: A Contextual Framework of Gender Representation. *Sex roles*. [Online] 49 (9–10), 545–551.

Garon, S. M. (1997) *Molding Japanese minds : the state in everyday life*. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University.

Genda, Y. & Brinton, M. C. (2007) A nagging sense of job insecurity: the new reality facing Japanese youth. The Journal of Japanese studies 33 (2) p.415–425.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Signorielli, N., & Morgan, M. (1980) 'Aging with television: Images on television drama and conceptions of social reality', *Journal of Communication*, 30, pp. 37-47

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M. and Signorielli, N. (1986) 'Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process', in: J. Bryant and D. Zillmann, eds. *Perspectives on media effects*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 17–48.

Gerbner, G. et al. (2000) 'Living With Television: The Violence Profile', in *The Fear of Crime*. 1st edition [Online]. Routledge. pp. 169–195.

Gill, R. (2007) Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European journal of cultural studies*. [Online] 10 (2), 147–166.

Gill, R. (2017) The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European journal of cultural studies*. [Online] 20 (6), 606–626.

Goldstein-Gidoni, O. (2017). The joy of normal living: The promise of happiness for Japanese women and their families. Asian Studies Review, 41(4), 555-572. Taylor & Francis.

Gössmann, H. M. (2015) 'New role models for men and women?: Gender in Japanese TV dramas', in *Japan Pop!: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*. pp. 207–221.

Hall, W. J. (2019) 'Sexual Orientation', Encyclopedia of Social Work. NASW Press and Oxford University Press.

Halpren, E.S., 1983. Auditing naturalistic inquiries: The development and application of a model (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). *Indiana University, Bloomington*.

Hasegawa, Y., (2014). Kakusa shakai ni okeru kazoku no seikatsu/kosodate/kyōiku to arata na kon'nan (New Issues in Family Life, Child Rearing, Education in an Unequal Society). Tokyo: Junposha

Hendry, J. (1993). Wrapping culture: Politeness, presentation, and power in Japan and other societies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hertog, E. (2008) 'The worst abuse against a child is the absence of a parent': how Japanese unwed mothers evaluate their decision to have a child outside wedlock. *Japan forum (Oxford, England)*. [Online] 20 (2), 193–217.

Hertog, E. et al. (2020) 'Attitudes to marriage and childbearing', in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture*. 1st edition [Online]. Routledge. pp. 92–105.

Hidaka, T. (2010) *Salaryman Masculinity: Continuity and Change in Hegemonic Masculinity in Japan*. 1st edition. Vol. 29. [Online]. Boston: BRILL.

Hiramoto, M. and Wong, A., 2005. Another look at 'Japanese women's language': A prosodic analysis. Proceedings from the Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society, 41(1). Chicago Linguistic Society

Hook, G.D. & Takeda, H. (2007) 'Self-Responsibility' and the Nature of the Postwar Japanese State: Risk through the Looking Glass. *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 33(1), 93–123.

Holloway, I. & Todres, L. (2003) The Status of Method: Flexibility, Consistency and Coherence. *Qualitative research : QR*. [Online] 3 (3), 345–357.

Hu, K. (2005) The power of circulation: digital technologies and the online Chinese fans of Japanese TV drama. *Inter-Asia cultural studies*. [Online] 6 (2), 171–186.

Hu, K. et al. (2007) 'The power of circulation: Digital technologies and the online Chinese fans of Japanese TV drama', in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*. 1st edition [Online]. Routledge. pp. 550–567.

Huffington Post Japan (2020). 'ストーリー'. HuffPost Japan [online] Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/story_jp_5fe1ce1fc5b64e4420ff811a [Accessed 8 February 2025].

Ikeuchi, H., (2002). Koware kake fūfu no toraburu, kaiketsu shimasu (Couple's Troubles and Their Resolutions). Tokyo: Magajin Housu.

Innami, F. (2021) Intimate Japan: Ethnographies of Closeness and Conflict: edited by Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2018, 284 pp. *Japan forum (Oxford, England)*. [Online] 33 (4), 780–781.

Imamura, A. E. (1987) The Japanese urban housewife: Traditional and modern social participation. *The Social science journal (Fort Collins)*. [Online]

Imai, J., 2010. *The transformation of Japanese employment relations: reform without labor*. Springer.

IPSS (International Population Studies). (n.d.). Home page. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

Ishii, K. & Jarkey, N. (2002) 'The Housewife Is Born: The Establishment of the Notion and Identity of the Shufu in Modern Japan', *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 22(1), 35–47.

Ishii-Kuntz, M. (2005) 'Balancing fatherhood and work: emergence of diverse masculinities in contemporary Japan', in *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan*. Routledge, pp. 216–234. [Online].

Ishii-Kuntz, M. et al. (2004) 'Japanese Fathers of Preschoolers and Their Involvement in Child Care', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(3), 779–791.

Ishiyama, R. (2016) 'Japan: Why so few women journalists?', in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism*. [Online]. pp. 404–418.

Ivry, T. (2009) *Embodying Culture: Pregnancy in Japan and Israel*. 1st edition. [Online]. United States: Rutgers University Press.

Iwabuchi, K. & Koichi Iwabuchi (2004) *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*. 1st edition. Aberdeen: Hong Kong University Press

Iwata-Weickgenannt, K. and Rosenbaum, R. (eds.) (2015) *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Popular Culture and Literature*. Abingdon, Oxford & New York: Routledge.

Iwao, S. (1993). *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality*. New York: Free Press

Japan activists demand dual-surname option on Women's Day. *The Asahi Shimbun*: Breaking News, Japan News and Analysis.

Japan ranks 118th in global gender gap report; up from previous year. *The Japan News*.

Jones, G. W. (2007) Delayed Marriage and Very Low Fertility in Pacific Asia. *Population and development review*. [Online] 33 (3), 453–478.

Kakeo, Y., Kondo, A. & Yano, K. (2010). The Guide to Japanese Film Industry and Co-Production

Kan, M.-Y. et al. (2019) 'Housework share and fertility preference in four East Asian countries in 2006 and 2012', *Demographic Research*, 41(35), 1021–1046.

Kan, M.-Y. et al. (2022) Revisiting the Gender Revolution: Time on Paid Work, Domestic Work, and Total Work in East Asian and Western Societies 1985–2016. *Gender & society*. [Online] 36 (3), 368–396.

Kan, M.-Y. & Hertog, E. (2017) Domestic division of labour and fertility preference in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. *Demographic research*. [Online] 36 (1), 557–588.

King, N. et al. (2004) 'Using Templates in the Thematic Analysis of Text', in *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. [Online]. London: SAGE

Kobayashi, Mayu et al. (2016) Sharing housework between husbands and wives: How to improve marital satisfaction for working wives in Japan. *IZA journal of labor policy*. [Online] 5 (18), 1–15.

Publications Ltd. pp. 256–270.

Kudomi, Y., (1993). Yutakasa no teihen ni ikiru (Living on the Lower Ranges of Affluence). Tokyo: Aoki Shoten

Kunihiro, Y. (1997) 'Terebi ni egakareru shufuzou: Gakkou housou bangumi no naiyou bunseki kara' [The image of housewives as portrayed by educational TV programs], *Bulletin of the Institute for Communications Research*.

Kurotani, S. (2014). 'Working women of the bubble generation'. In: White, M.I. (ed.) Capturing contemporary Japan: Differentiation and uncertainty. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press

Lafky, S., Duffy, M., Steinmaus, D. & Berkowitz, L. (1996). 'Looking through gendered lenses: Female stereotyping in advertisements and gender role expectations'. Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 73(2)

Lauzen, M. M. et al. (2008) Constructing Gender Stereotypes Through Social Roles in Prime-Time Television. *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media*. [Online] 52 (2), 200–214.

Lee, K. S. & Fujita, Y. (2011) Economic recession and the nature and pace of social change in Japan. *Social science research*. [Online] 40 (3), 784–795.

Lesthaeghe, R. (1983) A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe: An Exploration of Underlying Dimensions. *Population and development review*. [Online] 9 (3), 411–435.

Lesthaeghe, R. (2014) second demographic transition: A concise overview of its development. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences - PNAS*. [Online] 111 (51), 18112–18115.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, Calif: Sage.

Lopez, Q. & Bucholtz, M. (2017) 'How my hair look?': Linguistic authenticity and racialized gender and sexuality on The Wire. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*. 6 (1), 1–29.

Lukacs, G. (2010) *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan*. 1st edition. Durham: Duke University Press.

Macnaughtan, H. (2005) Women, work, and the Japanese economic miracle: The case of the cotton textile industry, 1945–1975. London: RoutledgeCurzon

Macnaughtan, H. (2015) 'Womenomics for Japan: Is the Abe policy for gendered employment viable in an era of precarity?', *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*

Manne, K. (2017) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. 1st edition. [Online]. New York: Oxford University Press.

Maree, C. (2017) Weddings and white dresses: Media and sexual citizenship in Japan. *Sexualities*. [Online] 20 (1–2), 212–233.

Maree, C. (2018) 'Writing sexual identity onto the small screen: Seitekishōsū-sha (sexual minorities) in Japan', in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media*. [Online]. pp. 200–212.

Matanle, P. et al. (2014) Popular Culture and Workplace Gendering among Varieties of Capitalism: Working Women and their Representation in Japanese Manga. *Gender, work, and organization*. [Online] 21 (5), 472–489.

Matsuda, S. et al. (2024) 'Deterioration in youth employment, social contexts, and marriage decline in Japan and South Korea', *Asian Population Studies*, 20(2), 203–221.

Matthes, J. et al. (2016) Gender-Role Portrayals in Television Advertising Across the Globe. *Sex roles*. [Online] 75 (7–8), 314–327.

McLaren, S. et al. (2020) ‘Gender, media, and misogyny in Japan’, in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture*. 1st edition [Online]. Routledge. pp. 340–350.

McNeill, D., (2014). 'Japan’s Contemporary Media,' in J. Kingston, ed. Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

McRobbie, A. (2009) *The aftermath of feminism : gender, culture and social change*. London ; Sage

Megha, A. and Arora, A. (2020) ‘ImNotAChickFlick: Neoliberalism and post-feminism in Veere Di Wedding (My Friend’s Wedding, 2018)’, *BioScope South Asian Screen Studies*, 11(1), pp. 146–168. [Online].

Miles, E.F., **.** (2017)**.**. *Men of No Value: Contemporary Japanese Manhood and the Economies of Intimacy*. Yale University

Miller, L. (2011) Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan. *International journal of Japanese sociology : IJJS*. [Online] 20 (1), 18–29.

Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2025. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare Japan. [online] Available at: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/index.html [Accessed 9 February 2025].

Mizukoshi, K. et al. (2016) Japan’s ikumen discourse: macro and micro perspectives on modern fatherhood. *Japan forum (Oxford, England)*. [Online] 28 (2), 212–232.

Morgan, M. (1990) ‘International cultivation analysis’, in: N. Signorielli and M. Morgan, eds. *Cultivation analysis: New directions in media effects research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 225–247.

Morioka, M. (2013). 'A phenomenological study of “herbivore men”', Journal of Philosophy of Life, 3(1), pp. 1-18.

Morgan, M. and Shanahan, J. (1991) ‘Television and the cultivation of political attitudes in Argentina’, *Journal of Communication*, 41(1), pp. 88–103.

Morse, J.M. and Richards, L., (2002) *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. SAGE Publications, Incorporated.

Nakano, L. & Wagatsuma, M. (2012) ‘Mothers and their unmarried daughters: An intimate look at generational change’, in *Japan’s Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?* [Online]. pp. 137–154.

Nakano, M. (2014) “Ikukyū sedai” no jirenma: josei katsuyō wa naze shippai suru no ka. Tōkyō: Kabushiki Kaisha Kōbunsha.

Nemoto, K. (2008) ‘Postponed marriage: Exploring women’s views of matrimony and work in Japan’, *Gender & Society*, 22(2), pp. 219–237. [Online].

Nemoto, K. (2016) *Too few women at the top: The persistence of inequality in Japan*. 1st edition. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Nishimura, T. et al. (2022) Collaboration among psychological researchers, the government, and non-profit organizations for “Konkatsu” (marriage hunting) in Japan. *Frontiers in psychology*. [Online] 13982102–982102.

Nobushima, A. (1998). 'Nihon no terebi koukoku ni okeru jenda byosha [The portrayal of gender in Japanese television advertisements]'. Journal of Advertising Science

Nolte, S.H. & Hastings, S.A. (1991). 'The Meiji state's policy toward women, 1890-1910'. In: Bernstein, G.L. (ed.) Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 151-174.

Norris, C. (2009) ‘Manga, anime and visual art culture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*. [Online]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 236–260.

North, S. et al. (2011) Deadly virtues: Inner-worldly asceticism and karôshi in Japan. *Current sociology*. [Online] 59 (2), 146–159.

Nowell, L.S., et al. (2017) ‘Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), pp. 1–13. [Online].

Okamoto, S. & Smith, J. S. S. (2008) Constructing Linguistic Femininity in Contemporary Japan: Scholarly and Popular Representations. *Gender and language*. [Online] 2 (1), 87–112.

O’Neill, R. (2015) ‘Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, post-feminism, and sexual politics’, *Men and Masculinities*, 18(1), pp. 100–120. [Online].

Omori, K. and Ota, H. (2023) ‘Japan’s struggle to improve gender equality: Japanese culture, gender role/expectation through family, social societal and media dialogues’, *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 33(1), pp. 1–11. [Online].

Oppliger, P.A., 2007. Effects of gender stereotyping on socialization. *Mass media effects research: Advances through meta-analysis*, pp.199-214.

Osawa, M. (2000) Government Approaches to Gender Equality in the mid-1990s. *Social science Japan journal*. [Online] 3 (1), 3–19.

Osawa, M. (2006) ‘The Vicious Cycle of the "Male Breadwinner" Model of Livelihood Security’, *Women’s Asia 21 - Voices from Japan*, 16, pp. 1–5.

Painter, A. A. (1993) Japanese Daytime Television, Popular Culture, and Ideology. *The Journal of Japanese studies*. [Online] 19 (2), 295–325.

Piotrowski, M. et al. (2019) Gender Role Attitudes: An Examination of Cohort Effects in Japan. *Journal of marriage and family*. [Online] 81 (4), 863–884.

Plummer, K. (2003) *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. 1st edition. Montréal: MQUP.

Pope, C. et al. (2000) Qualitative Research in Health Care: Analysing Qualitative Data. *BMJ (Online)*. [Online] 320 (7227), 114–116.

Prieler, M. et al. (2011) Gender Representation of Older People in Japanese Television Advertisements. *Sex roles*. [Online] 64 (5–6), 405–415.

Prieler, M. et al. (2015) Gender representations in East Asian advertising: Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea. *Communication & Society*. [Online] 28 (1), 27-.

Pusztai, B. (2015) 'Adapting the medium: Dynamics of intermedial adaptation in contemporary Japanese popular visual culture', *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 10(1), pp. 141–152. [Online].

Qian, Y. & Sayer, L. C. (2016) Division of Labor, Gender Ideology, and Marital Satisfaction in East Asia. *Journal of marriage and family*. [Online] 78 (2), 383–400.

Raymo, J. M. & Miho Iwasawa (2005) Marriage Market Mismatches in Japan: An Alternative View of the Relationship between Women's Education and Marriage. *American sociological review*. [Online] 70 (5), 801–822.

Raymo, J. M. (2022) The second demographic transition in Japan: a review of the evidence. *China population and development studies*. [Online] 6 (3), 267–287.

Roberson, J. E. & Suzuki, N. (2005) *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*. 1st edition. [Online]. Oxford: Taylor and Francis.

Rosenberger, N. R. (2013) *Dilemmas of Adulthood: Japanese Women and the Nuances of Long-Term Resistance*. 1st edition. [Online]. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Rottenberg, C. (2014) The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. *Cultural studies (London, England)*. [Online] 28 (3), 418–437.

Saito, S. (2007) 'Television and the Cultivation of Gender-Role Attitudes in Japan: Does Television Contribute to the Maintenance of the Status Quo?', *Journal of Communication*, 57(3), pp. 511–531.

Saladin, R. (2015) Between gyaru-o and sōshokukei danshi: body discourses in lifestyle magazines for young Japanese men. *Contemporary Japan (Berlin, Germany)*. [Online] 27 (1), 53–70.

Scherer, E. & Thelen, T. (2020) On countryside roads to national identity: Japanese morning drama series (asadora) and contents tourism. *Japan forum (Oxford, England)*. [Online] 32 (1), 6–29.

Scott, J. W. (2018) *Gender and the politics of history*. 30th anniversary edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shanahan, J. & Morgan, M. (1999) *Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research*. 1st edition. [Online]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shirahase, S. (2014) *Social inequality in Japan*. 1st ed. [Online]. New York: Routledge.

Shire, K. A. (2000) 'Gendered organization and workplace culture in Japanese customer services', *Social Science Japan Journal*, 3(1), pp. 37–57. [Online].

Shibamoto-Smith, J. S., 1985. Japanese Women's Language. Orlando, FL: Academic Press

Shibamoto-Smith, J. S. (2013) *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan* by Gabriella Lukács (review), *Cinema Journal*, 53(1), pp. 175–179.

Shinkawa, T. (2012) Substitutes for Immigrants?: Social Policy Responses to Population Decreases in Japan. *The American behavioral scientist (Beverly Hills)*. [Online] 56 (8), 1123–1138.

Shizuko, K. (2013) *Ryosai Kenbo the educational ideal of 'good wife, wise mother' in modern Japan*. Boston: Brill.

Smith, S.L. and Granados, A.D. (2009) *Content patterns and effects surrounding sex-role stereotyping on television and film*. In: Bryant, J. and Oliver, M.B. (eds.) *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. New York: Routledge.

Steel, G. (2019) *Beyond the gender gap in Japan*. Gill Steel (ed.). Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press. [Online].

Suzuki, M. F. (1995). 'Women and television: Portrayal of women in the mass media'. In: Japanese women: New feminist perspectives on the past, present, and future

Shikata, Y., (2018). 'Jendā to Media' (Gender and Media), in S. Oi, N. Tamura and Y. Suzuki, eds. Gen-dai Jyānarizumu o Manabu Hito no Tame ni (For Those Who Study Contemporary Journalism). Kyoto: Sekaishisosha

Suganuma, K. (2018) 'Queering mainstream media: Matsuko Deluxe as modern-day kuroko', in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media*. [Online]. pp. 169–179.

Sugimoto, Y. (2014) An Introduction to Japanese Society. Fourth edition. [Online]. West Nyack: Cambridge University Press.

Statista Research Department (2023) Birth rate in France from 1994 to 2022. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/464092/birth-rate-in-france/ (Accessed: 18 February 2025)

Suzuki, M.F. (1995) Women and television: Portrayal of women in the mass media. New York: The Feminist Press.

Taga, F. (2017) 'Dilemma of fatherhood: The meaning of work, family, and happiness for salaried male Japanese workers', in *Life Course, Happiness and Well-Being in Japan*. [Online]. pp. 175–186.

Tanaka, H., Godzik, M., & Iwata-Weickgenannt, K. (Eds.). (2013). ライフコース選択のゆくえ: 日本とドイツの仕事・家族・住まい [Beyond a Standardized Life Course: Biographical Choices about Work, Family and Housing in Japan and Germany]. *Tokyo: Shinyōsha.*

Takahashi, K. (2020) 'なぜ「逃げ恥」は"国民的ドラマ"になり得たのか？', *Asahi Dot*, Available at: https://dot.asahi.com/articles/-/96370?page=4 (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Takemaru, N. (2010) *Women in the Language and Society of Japan: The Linguistic Roots of Bias*. 1st edition. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers.

Takenobu, M., 2017. 'Josei ga kagayaku: Seisaku no Futsugona Shinjitsu' (The Inconvenient Truth of the Women Can Shine Policy), Onnatachi no 21 Seiki

Tasker et al. (2007) *Interrogating Postfeminism*. [Online]. Duke University Press.

Tasker, Y. (2020) Vernacular Feminism: Gendered Media Cultures and Historical Perspectives on Postdiscourse. *Television & new media*. [Online] 21 (6), 671–675.

TBS. (2016) *Nigeru wa haji da ga yaku ni tatsu* [TV series]. Netflix.

TBS. (n.d.). *逃げるは恥だが役に立つ [Nigeru wa Haji da ga Yaku ni Tatsu]*. Retrieved February 8, 2025, from https://www.tbs.co.jp/NIGEHAJI_tbs/

Thorne, S. (2000) Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence-based nursing*. [Online] 3 (3), 68–70.

Thorne, S., (2016) *Interpretive description: Qualitative research for applied practice*. Routledge.

Tokuhiro, Y. (2009) *Marriage in contemporary Japan*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Traphagan, J.W. and Knight, J. (eds.), 2003. Demographic Change and the Family in Japan's Aging Society. Albany: State University of New York Press

Tsutsui, J., 2016. Female labor participation and the sexual division of labor: A consideration on the persistent male-breadwinner model. *Japan Labor Review*, *13*(3), pp.80-100.

Uchida, A. (1992) When "difference" is "dominance": A critique of the "anti-power-based" cultural approach to sex differences1. *Language in society*. [Online] 21 (4), 547–568.

Valaskivi, K., 2015. 'Mass Media in Japan', in J. Babb, ed., The Sage Handbook of Modern Japanese Studies. London: Sage

Villi, M. & Hayashi, K. (2017) 'The Mission is to Keep this Industry Intact': Digital transition in the Japanese newspaper industry. *Journalism studies (London, England)*. [Online] 18 (8), 960–977.

Vogel, S. H. (1988) 'Urban Japanese housewives: At home and in the community. By Anne E. Imamura', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 47(2), pp. 375–376. [Online].

Vogel, E. F. (2013) *Japan's new middle class, 3rd edition*. 3rd ed. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Wagner, A. (2006) 'Japanese Women and Gender Politics', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 34(1), 125–138. [Online].

Wakata,Y.(2021) 'Story', HuffPost Japan, 2 January. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/story_jp_5fe1ce1fc5b64e4420ff811a (Accessed: 17 February 2025)

West, C. & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987) Doing Gender. *Gender & society*. [Online] 1 (2), 125–151.

World Economic Forum (2018) Global Gender Gap Report 2018. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/publications/reader-global-gender-gap-report-2018/in-full/results-and-analysis

World Economic Forum, (2024). Global Gender Gap Report 2024. [online] Available at: https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/digest/ [Accessed 9 February 2025].

White, L. (2018) 'Common-law marriage as a form of koseki resistance', in *Gender and the Koseki in Contemporary Japan*. 1st edition [Online]. United Kingdom: Routledge. pp. 47–64.

White, L. (2021) Not Entirely Married: Resisting the Hegemonic Patrilineal Family in Japan's Household Registry. *Positions : Asia Critique*. [Online] 29 (3), 581–606.

Yamada, S., 2013. Equal employment opportunity act, having passed the quarter-century milestone. *Japan Labor Review*, *10*(2), pp.6-19.

Yamamoto, M. & Ran, W. (2014) Should Men Work Outside and Women Stay Home? Revisiting the Cultivation of Gender-Role Attitudes in Japan. *Mass communication & society*. [Online] 17 (6), 920–942.

Yoshida, A. (2017) *Unmarried Women in Japan: The drift into singlehood*. 1st edition. [Online]. Oxford: Routledge.

Yoshimoto, M., 2010. 'Why Japanese Television Now?' in M. Yoshimoto, E. Tsai and J. Choi, eds. Television, Japan, and Globalization. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan

Zelizer, V. A. (2010) 'Caring Everywhere', in *Economic Lives*. [Online]. Princeton University Press. pp. 275-.