

## Enjoying Manga as *Fujoshi*: Exploring its Innovation and Potential for Social Change from a Gender Perspective

Hiromi Tanaka<sup>1</sup> and Saori Ishida<sup>2</sup>

Japanese comics known as manga and its related products such as anime play an important role in contemporary cultural consumption in Japan and beyond. This paper focuses on female manga fans called *Fujoshi* and examines their unique way of enjoying manga from a gender perspective. Drawing on theories of media consumption and enjoyment in leisure and using qualitative research methods, this paper identifies three factors that characterize the way *Fujoshi* enjoy manga: the importance of enjoyment or an experience of what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow', the lack of oppositional reading, and the importance of interaction with other *Fujoshi*. The authors conclude that *Fujoshi*'s way of enjoying manga involves ambivalences. Though it has positive impact on their quality of life, its contribution to the transformation of gender relations is limited. Also, interactions within a *Fujoshi* fandom can not only nurture mutual understanding and friendship but also cause certain tensions among them.

**Keywords:** manga, gender, popular culture, leisure, Japan

Japanese comics known as manga play an important role in contemporary cultural consumption in Japan and beyond. They are sold across borders and their fans can be found in many regions from Asia, North America to Western Europe. Some of them even come to Japan, visiting towns in which famous stories are located, or going to areas in Tokyo being famous for comics.

Manga and anime or their animated productions have drawn much attention from Japanese gender and media researchers, because they represent a strongly gendered form of media. Many analyses of media representations of male and female characters stress that gender stereotypes are often transmitted through stories and visual images, whereby a binary system of masculinities and femininities is reinforced (Fujita, 2011; Fujita, 2012; Saito, 2001; Takai, 2005; Wakakusa, 2003). It is also pointed out that manga fans appear to be passive in their reading and accept rather than reject gendered cultural codes embedded in media text they are engaged with (Tanaka, 2013). And yet, one should not exclude the possibility for media audiences' active engagement, as critical media researchers have long pointed out (Blumer & Katz, 1974; Hall, 1980).

In this paper we shed light on a unique form of enjoying manga that led to the emergence of a manga fandom called *Fujoshi*, which literally means 'rotten girls'. These female manga fans typically love *yaoi*<sup>3</sup> and BL (boys' love), a genre depicting male-male romantic and sexual relationships<sup>4</sup>. Similarly to fans of the western slash fiction<sup>5</sup>, *Fujoshi* not only read *yaoi* or BL works produced by professional artists. Many of them are also amateur artists. They produce their own versions of popular works, usually those produced for boys. In other words, they transform homosocial<sup>6</sup> bonds between male characters featured in

<sup>1</sup> Assoc. Prof., School of Information and Communication, Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Student, Graduate School of Information and Communication, Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan

original works into homosexual relationships in their fantasy and then produce parodies with a homoerotic motif. This queer reading is in a way innovative, because it challenges the conventional way of reading and allows a new way of interpretation, expanding the scope of conventional manga reading.

Drawing on existing studies about gender, media, and consumption as well as leisure and enjoyment, we examine *Fujoshi*'s way of enjoying manga. We pay a particular attention to their active way of enjoying manga including the re-interpretation of original works, the production, distribution, and consumption of derivative works as well as simply reading the original works. We also explore whether these readers simply accept or negotiate and/or reject hegemonic codes based on the traditional gender ideology embedded in the original stories. It is an interesting question from a gender perspective because in case of such rejection readers show their agency in intervening the seemingly static process of cultural consumption in which the conventional gender stereotypes are repeatedly produced and reproduced while being uncritically consumed by readers. We discuss this question of social change, too.

In the following sections we first review existing research about manga and gender in Japan relevant for our study. We will then offer a conceptual framework for our analysis. After explaining our hypotheses and research methods, we will present and discuss our findings.

## Literature Review

The term *Fujoshi* began to proliferate in the 2000s. It is therefore only until recently that it became an object of inquiry<sup>7</sup>. In 2007, a literary magazine, *Yureka*, published a special issue on *Fujoshi*. This contributed to the expansion of the term's usage in Japan.

Besides literary critiques published in non-academic media (Nakajima, 1991; Nimiya, 1995; Sugiura, 2006), only a few academic studies about *Fujoshi* have been published so far<sup>8</sup>. Galbraith (2011), one of the earliest academic publications about *Fujoshi*, investigates a *Fujoshi* community. Drawing on his own ethnographic work, he stresses the importance of a space created by *Fujoshi* for their fantasy, mutual exchange, and friendship. Importantly, he points out that in the process of space creation, *Fujoshi* differentiate themselves from non-*Fujoshi* whom they call *ippanjin* or normal people.

Galbraith's study succeeds earlier works about *yaoi* or BL (e.g. Levi, McHarry, & Pagliassotti, 2010; Thorn, 2004; Vincent, 2007; Welker, 2006; Zanghellini, 2009). But he misses an important gender issue raised by earlier works such as Thorn (2004) and Ueno (1998) that female manga and anime fans of *yaoi* and BL may be discontent with the conventional norms of gender and sexuality existing in Japanese society, that women are dominated by men in the public (e.g. corporations, institutional politics) and the private (e.g.

<sup>3</sup> *Yaoi* is an abbreviation of 'yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi' or 'No build-up, no foreclosure, and no meaning' (Kinsella 1998:301). Though *Fujoshi* is a new word, manga works about male homosexual relationships has been popular since 1970s. See Galbraith (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For a good overview of *yaoi* and BL, see Zanghellini (2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Thorn (2004).

family, intimate relationship). Such discontent has been seen as an important factor to drive women and girls into the world of queer reading, in which these women and girls enjoy making male homosexual couples, seeing both an aggressor and his target are male, thus no female being subordinated.

Kaneda (2007) discusses various aspects of a *Fujoshi* phenomenon, particularly their manga reading and community. Her study lacks a systematic, theoretically and empirically grounded analysis, but it significantly connects *Fujoshi* studies with critical media studies. Of particular importance is her reference to Hall's theory of encoding and decoding. Here she assumes that *Fujoshi* does no oppositional reading: *Fujoshi* does not challenge the dominant meanings encoded in the media text, even though they do queer reading.

Kaneda's suggestion overlaps with the findings of Tanaka (2013), which examined young people's reading of boys' sports manga. She examines how male and female fans of Japanese sports manga "SLAM DUNK", a phenomenally popular work published in the early 1990's<sup>9</sup>, consume hegemonic codes based on gender ideology and embedded in messages disseminated through the manga. She found no sign of contestation against traditional gender norms among her informants. She concludes that boys' sports manga reading by young readers contributes to rather than intervenes the reproduction of the existing gender structure. Though Tanaka's study is not about *Fujoshi*, it would be interesting to explore the same question about social change regarding *Fujoshi*.

## Objectives

In this paper we investigate how *Fujoshi* enjoy manga and in which way their reading is different from other dominant forms of manga reading. We also explore its possibility for their intervening the existing gender structure, for example, whether they accept the mainstream gender and sexuality norms (see Literature Review).

## Conceptual Framework

For our analysis we use Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of media communication (Hall, 1980), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory about "flow", which is an experience or the psychological state of an individual that shall bring about enjoyment and thus enhance the quality of life of that individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Hall's theory offers a typology of media audiences' reading or consumption of a media text. According to Hall (1980) there are three types of reading, depending on how the audience receives or reacts to the media messages. Dominant, preferred or hegemonic reading

<sup>6</sup> The term homosocial refers to a male group in which non-sexual male bonds are emphasized. Theoretically, two factors characterize such a group: the exclusion of women (misogyny) and a taboo of homosexuality (homophobia). See Sedgewick (1985).

<sup>7</sup> Though the term *Fujoshi* was a recent invention, the depiction of male homosexual bonds can be traced back to around 1970, first in *shojo manga* or manga for girls and later in *yaoi/BL* as an independent genre. In this paper we focus on *Fujoshi* who enjoy reading *yaoi/BL* and producing sexualized 'parodies' of originally non-*yaoi/BL* works.

<sup>8</sup> One reason is that the fandom of *yaoi* and *BL* has been rarely researched before the term *Fujoshi* was coined. See Zanghelini (2009, p. 280).

<sup>9</sup> SLAM DUNK is popular among *Fujoshi*. There are homoerotic parodies made by *Fujoshi*.

means that readers accept hegemonic meaning coded in the media text on the basis of dominant ideology (e.g. mainstream gender ideology) in the society. This type of reading helps reproduce the existing cultural structure. In negotiated reading readers accept a hegemonic meaning, but they may modify (i.e. negotiate) its meaning, reflecting on their own social position or experience. In case of oppositional reading readers reject dominant meanings. We are interested in exploring how *Fujoshi*'s reading fits this typology or how their reading can be understood in this framework offered by Hall.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) discusses the state of an individual in which s/he is absorbed in a certain activity, enjoy or is amused by something. He calls this state a "flow" which is conceptualized as something that can make leisure as what it is supposed to be. He differentiates between pleasure and enjoyment. According to him, both are important constituents of quality of life, but he places a stronger emphasis on enjoyment, because it leads to a "flow". He argues that enjoyment promotes one's growth or development and thus enhances his or her quality of life. Pleasure does not have this quality. What makes these two elements clearly different is a challenge, for which one needs to use expressive skills. In contrast to instrumental skills needed to adapt to the environment, expressive skills enable one to express subjective experiences. He contends that only with these expressive skills utilized, leisure activities can be meaningful and bring about enjoyment. Expressive skills are regarded as crucial in building and keeping friendship or companionship, which shall eventually promote enjoyment.

For our analysis, Hall's model is useful for a critical examination of the relationship between *Fujoshi* and a media text they enjoy. The model of Csikszentmihalyi is important for us to identify and investigate dimensions of their enjoying manga. We combine these models with a gender perspective that allows us to critically look at the social practice and process related to *Fujoshi* and pay attention to the possibility of their intervention in the society's gender order that characterizes today's media including manga and their audiences.

## Hypotheses

Our study belongs to qualitative research of which strength lies in generating theories rather than testing pre-fixed hypotheses. As working hypotheses, however, we expected to find that *Fujoshi* may not necessarily reject gendered hegemonic codes embedded in the original manga and their way of manga reading has thus only limited potential for intervening a gendered dimension of the society. We also expected that *Fujoshi* enjoys manga, but we were determined to carefully examine on the basis of our data how exactly they enjoy it and whether this enjoying can be seen as what Csikszentmihalyi called enjoyment.

## Method

We conducted semi-structured interviews (see Table 1 for interview topic guide) and qualitative content analysis of interview data (see Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). We interviewed seven heterosexual women, aged from 20 to 32, between November 2013 and February 2014 in Tokyo (see Table 2). All these women resided in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area. We contacted them either directly or through mutual acquaintances. All the persons we contacted accepted to cooperate for this study. We paid utmost attention to the privacy of our informants and carefully managed collected data. For data analysis we

individually coded the data and discussed the results of our coding together, particularly when any differences arose.

Table 1

*Interview Topics*


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- Self-introduction
- Favorite works, favorite characters
- Intensity of reading/buying manga (how often)
- The number of manga works possessed
- Money invested for related activities (purchase of books, etc.)
- Beginning as *Fujoshi* (how you became *Fujoshi*)
- Beginning to transform a homosocial world of boys' manga into a homosexual world (how started)
- Pleasure of such transforming (How do you like the transforming? What is exciting in that?)
- Only to those who write derivative works: How you started doing that? What is fun?/How do you like that?
- Interaction with other *Fujoshi* (Do you have any friends with the same hobby?/ Do you have any contact with other *Fujoshi*?/ Do you want to get to know other *Fujoshi*?)
- What is the most beautiful experience you have since you became *Fujoshi*?
- What is the hardest thing you experienced since you became *Fujoshi*?

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Table 2

*List of Informants*


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<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>History of being Fujoshi</u>
A	22	College student	Since the age 10
B	20	College student	Since the age 16
C	20	College student	Since the age 8
D	27	Office worker	Since the age of 13 or 14
E	22	College student	Since the age of 10
F	32	Office worker	Since the age of 13
G	26	Office worker	Since the age of 16

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All the informants had fun in reading boys' manga, both original works and parodies. Four of them were college students, while three of them were employed. Interviews were structured around a set of topics, ranging from years of experience of being *Fujoshi*, opportunity to become *Fujoshi*, favorite works, to interaction with other *Fujoshi* (see Table 2).

All of them except one started reading *yaoi* or BL in teens (see Table 1). They devoted their spare time in their busy school life<sup>10</sup> to reading manga and eventually grew out of passive readers into active agents who enjoy producing their own artworks. Many of them first got to know *yaoi* or BL through peers in school and/or family. Many others came across works of this genre accidentally on the Internet or in bookstores (while many parodies are shared outside a commercial book market, some works are sold in common bookstores).

When they first encountered homoeroticism in *yaoi* or BL, all of them except one informant accepted it naturally, because they were young and did not yet fully internalize the conventional heteronormative gender norms<sup>11</sup>.

## Results

Our analysis led us to identify the following three dimensions that characterize *Fujoshi*'s way of enjoying manga: the importance of enjoyment, lack of oppositional reading, the process and the practice of social differentiation within *Fujoshi*'s community as well as between their community and outside.

### Importance of Enjoyment

Our informants were attracted to *Fujoshi*'s way of enjoying manga for two reasons. First, the queer reading helped them open up a new avenue in enjoying manga. The conventional, non-queer way of reading appeared to be static to them. With the queer reading they learned a different way of developing their fantasies and creativity. Second, they "have fun" (Informant G) in mutual exchange and build a friendship with other *Fujoshi*. The fact that they share a hobby, which is not easily understood by non-*Fujoshi* people, increases the intensity of their interaction. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) says that the shared objectives and activities in friendships bring about enjoyment. This applies to *Fujoshi*, too, particularly those who share fun by using expressive skills for producing their own artworks.

We also found that *Fujoshi* as amateur artists feel positively challenged in producing their own works. It is because they make tremendous efforts in their production. Our informants who are such artists feel a sense of accomplishment, when they see their efforts turn out to be successful. That's why they are so engaged in their activities. This can be seen as a "flow", but to keep an experience of "flow" they need to retain their original motivation. An impetus to produce an artwork has to emerge internally without any external impetus. As one informant (C) put it well, many *Fujoshi* artists produce their own works basically for self-contentment. However, this simple impulse may eventually be replaced with something else, as another informant (E) said: "*if you are forced to produce, it is (not a leisure but) a job.*"

Self-development is another key element. Some informants enjoy reading works produced by other *Fujoshi*. This is because they "could [...] learn different perspectives" from others (Informant C). This promotes their mutual exchange in public events in which they can present their works and have conversations with others. Their desire to learn is obvious here.

### Negotiated Reading and the Lack of Oppositional Reading

We found *Fujoshi*'s manga reading is negotiated one. They accept homosocial, heterosexual elements in original works. They are in fact fans of the original works and usually avoid criticizing them. In case there is a discrepancy between what is described in heterosexual romance in an original work and *Fujoshi*'s fantasy developing out of this original work, there are at least two options for them. Either that they stop their fantasy (Informant G: "*the world I have been creating is shaken by the official (work) and I*

*came back to reality*" or that they allow both their own world and the original world to coexist (Informant B: [Mine] exist outside of the original).

What they negotiate in their reading is a homosocial element in the original works. They are obviously attracted to homosocial male bonds, but it is just one way to treat their taste for homosocial male bonds that they transform these bonds into homosexual ones. (Informant E: "*It does not have to be romance*"; Informant C: "*I just love that [certain male characters] are fond of each other*"; Informant G: "*A male friendship can be smoothly transformed in a romantic one*". Nevertheless, they do so, because "*[they are] not [male homosexuals]*" (Informant C) or "*as a woman, [Fujoshi] cannot not experience such a gay relationship*" (Informant E). "*If it were a heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman, I would compare it with a real one in my real life. [...] A homosexual one between men appears very special*" (Informant E).

All of our informants are heterosexual women. They reject a feminine passivity in a heterosexual relationship and make pairs of male characters. However, it is not that they do not allow women to exist in their fantasy. They do positively accept female characters, even the gendered way of representation of these characters in original works (Informant C: "*[A heroin is] a beautiful flower among guys*". There is another contradiction that such a feminine passivity as they reject characterizes a male-male sexual relationship they create. We will discuss this point in detail in the final section (see Discussion).

### External and internal differences

On one hand, *Fujoshi* differentiate themselves from non-*Fujoshi* people. One informant (D) is ashamed of spending much money on manga and related activities, saying "*some people have a financial plan and save money but I spend so much money on things like that. I feel so bad.*" Similarly, another informant (E) compares herself with other women who "*invest money in improving their appearance, going to a beauty salon, and saving money for their future marriage*". These narratives imply that these informants internalize certain social norms and have conflicts with them, because they as *Fujoshi* do not conform to these norms (in this case what an adult or adult woman should do). Here they may feel they are deviant and feel stigmatized.

At the same time, *Fujoshi* tends to be exclusive to non-*Fujoshi* people. One of our informants (C) assumed that *Fujoshi* are different from others and said that "*basically they should not come out*". This informant does not like *Fujoshi*'s artworks being disposed to the public. Other informants (B, D) told that they hide their *Fujoshi* identity from their families, saying they were just manga fans. The practice of differentiation between *Fujoshi* and non-*Fujoshi* is clearly seen here.

A *Fujoshi* fandom is also internally differentiated. Their tastes for favorite works, characters and couples created in each work, and interpretations vary. Different tastes often lead to the formation of groupings. A clash of opinions between such groupings can even "*aggravate relations*" (Informant B).

<sup>10</sup> Japanese students have usually packed schedules, because most of them go to cram schools in the evening to prepare for entrance exams for an upper school.

<sup>11</sup> One informant said she wondered at first, why male characters are in romance, but she got used to it quickly.

Internal differences can also arise with regards to a varying degree of resources each *Fujoshi* possesses. According to Kaneda (2007), the following factors are important elements of their cultural capital: drawing skills, interpretative skills, and a commitment or what she calls an “attachment” to artworks without seeking any return. All our informants stress the importance of artistic skills in producing their artworks. But due to this, some feel frustrated. One of our informants (F) said, “*I cannot express as I want.*” Her frustration may worse by comparing her own works with those produced by other *Fujoshi* artists. In fact, internal differentiation between *Fujoshi* artists based on artistic skills can produce a certain hierarchy among them, and some feel self-humiliated in contrast to others who appear to be more skilled (Kaneda 2007). This may have a risk or what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) warns in his study: If a competition intensifies, the original objective of producing own artworks in the pursuit of happiness may give way to the pursuit of success in such a competition.

## Discussion

Like other studies, our study has certain methodological and theoretical limitations. The number of informants is limited, only a certain set of theoretical approaches were applied, and thus our scope might have been narrow. Nevertheless, our findings crystallized important aspects of our research object, Japanese female manga fans called *Fujoshi*, and how they enjoy manga. Importantly, as we discuss below, our findings point to ambivalences surrounding *Fujoshi*’s way of enjoying manga.

First, their community is united and divided. Their community tends to be exclusive, sometimes hidden from outside. The process and practice of external differentiation between *Fujoshi* and non-*Fujoshi* people reinforces internal coherence of their community. At the same time, this may strengthen their feeling of being deviant and marginalized in the society. Also, internal differences can be problematic, because they can lead to a conflict or a competition among them. Internal differences among women have long been an important issue in gender studies. In case their orientation to form a closed community intensifies and their intra-group competition exacerbates, their feeling of self-humiliation may intensify. We argue that whether *Fujoshi* continues to have enjoyment in reading and producing manga depends on how they negotiate these ambiguities.

Second, *fujoshi*’s manga reading appears to be conservative as well as innovative. Its innovation lies in expanding an interpretative framework of original works and thus opening up a new level of interpretation of the original stories. And yet *Fujoshi* do not necessarily challenge the gendered images and messages embedded in the original works. Even heteronormative codes of sexuality are actually used in their parodies, too. For example, a male homosexual relationship is typically formed between an aggressor and a recipient or an aggressor’s target. A recipient is often conceptualized as a character with a ‘feminine’ look and personalities (e.g. being emotional, jealous, good at cooking, etc.). This kind of practice reproduces rather than subvert the existing gender order that typifies manga. To change this practice is probably difficult, because, as our study revealed, it is likely that most *Fujoshi* internalize the mainstream social norms.

And yet, it is premature to conclude that *Fujoshi*’s way of enjoying manga has no potential for social change. As Hall (1980) and other cultural studies researchers stress, media audiences are no passive beings. It is thus important to keep an eye on the further development of *Fujoshi*.

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