

“But I am still a girl after all”
A Discourse Analysis of Femininities in Popular Japanese Manga
Comics

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Abstract

Where progression towards gender equality is concerned, Japan lags behind most other developed countries with its culture which heavily values tradition. However, its traditional gender roles may be changing as the birth-rate declines and women take up the increasing opportunities opening up for them in the workplace. Within the contexts of these tensions between traditionalism and change, this study investigated the constructions of femininity in popular Japanese manga, one of the most consumed forms of media in Japan which also enjoys global popularity. As such, this study approached manga as a potentially important resource for identifying the available meanings of being a young Japanese woman in contemporary Japanese society. To date, little research has examined manga, and much of the available literature has used content analysis or focused solely on superheroine characters and the romantic interest. As a point of difference, this research implemented discursive analyses and sought to identify a range of femininities made available to readers in manga. It examined four titles within two genres of manga: the shounen genre targeted to male audiences and the shoujo manga, targeted at a female audience. The research employed a feminist, poststructuralist framework to identify the ways in which constructions of femininity in manga drew on dominant Japanese discourses of femininity as well as more globally produced postfeminist discourses associated with popular culture. The study found that manga overall produced femininities within both traditional and contemporary postfeminist discourses. Analyses also highlighted the limited meanings of femininity made available to young female audiences of shoujo manga through dominant postfeminist, empty representations of ‘empowerment’ whilst also underlining the problematic dominance of sexist portrayals of young women in shounen manga. Further, the storylines of shoujo manga were found to be replete with romantic narratives, prioritising romance and marriage as a

means to happiness. These findings may identify the implications of such femininities on how young Japanese women view themselves, and are viewed by others globally.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Japanese manga comics are the most widely circulated form of media in Japan (Matanle et al., 2014) and are enjoyed by Japanese people from childhood to adulthood. Manga's major presence within Japanese culture is furthered by its derivatives such as animation, videogames, television and merchandise (Saito, 2011). The wide variety of genres within manga suited to people of any age, gender and interest has also been viewed as part its success (Fusanosuke, 2003). Despite its popularity and wide dispersal, to date, little research has examined manga. Much of the available literature has used content analysis and has focused on superheroine characters (Grigsby, 1998, Napier, 1998 & Kitteredge, 2014) and the romantic interest (Ogi, 2003), and so such versions of femininity are overrepresented in manga research. As a point of difference, this study uses discourse analysis and identifies several key femininities across the manga titles, analysing them within specific genres.

This chapter introduces readers to the Japanese cultural context, which is of key relevance to the research, in particular describing the current position of women in Japanese society. It will also describe manga and discuss both the important role it plays and the information it offers in regards to Japanese media and society. Following this description of manga, the chapter reviews the current literature which addresses femininities produced both in manga and its digital media derivatives. The chapter concludes with a description of the aims and purposes of the current research and its significance as a study carried out within a discursive framework.

The Japanese Context

Japan has the third highest wage discrepancy between men and women amongst developed countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014), with women on average earning 26.52% less than men. Further, women are normatively restricted to roles within the workplace as an ‘office lady’ (Ogi, 2003), a clerical position involving tasks which reflect the traditional housewife role such as preparing and serving tea to the male co-workers. As an ‘office lady’, a woman is never sent on a business trip or offered promotions to more authoritative roles. These data reflect some of the serious gender inequalities and restrictions faced by Japanese women. Although feminism exists in Japan, it is viewed negatively as an “aggressively individualistic, anti-children, anti-family, anti-male” Western extremist ideology (Roces, 2010, p. 1). Further, Western ideals such as individualism are perceived negatively in Japan, which instead favours traditional discourses and collectivism, and views challenges to traditional practices such as inequalities in gender and race as being immature (Kinsella, 1998).

However, this is not to say that resistance to gender inequality is completely non-existent in Japanese society. In the 1960s, an increase in Japanese female writers of fiction inspired discussions regarding gender roles through their writing, offering a forum where gender issues could finally be acknowledged (Gwynne, 2013). During the 1970s, Japanese feminists followed the influence of Western feminism and confronted political inequalities, especially those concerning traditional gender roles and employment (Gwynne, 2013). Alongside the growth and domination of postfeminist ideologies within popular culture worldwide in the 1990s, forms of postfeminism also began to appear in Japan. Although postfeminism is defined in various ways, it is fundamentally understood to emphasise the importance of women’s individualism, choice and its own notions of ‘empowerment’ (Gill, 2007). It also validates a hyper-feminine culture through its assumption that gender equality

has been achieved, eliminating the need for feminism (McRobbie, 2004), which postfeminist discourse constructs as a restrictive rejection of femininity and sexuality. Hyper-femininity, which can be described as an exaggerated embodiment of all characteristics, behaviours and interests associated with traditional femininity (Gill, 2007), claims a strong presence in both the West and Japan, evident through its depictions in products and media marketed towards a young female target consumer group. Despite the existence of postfeminism in Japan and its influences within contemporary Japanese society, the translation of some of its ideologies to a culture with persistent gender inequalities and stubborn traditional gender roles has been difficult. However, the fictional media in Japan potentially offer a site of the blended fusion between Japan's traditional culture and postfeminist influences.

Manga

Manga are the most widely consumed media in Japan (Matanle et al, 2014). Manga are Japanese comics created by Japanese artists and drawn in a unique, aesthetic style which became popularised in the late nineteenth century. The Japanese manga industry generates more revenue than the Japanese film industry, and in 1994 made up 35% of all material published in Japan (Kondo, 1995). Its popularity is further evident through its \$5.5 billion industry (2009), making it the biggest print industry in Japan (Wu & Aizawa, 2014). The manga industry has also been successful internationally- in the United States, the manga sales were valued at \$175 million in 2007 (Bryce et al., 2010). Its coverage of a broad range of genres, including romance, action-adventure, sexuality and many others, may explain its diverse audience. Successful manga titles are often re-released in other formats of media such as anime (Japanese cartoons), video games, live-action dramas and movies, while popular characters infiltrate commercials, billboards, and even political campaigns (Matanle et al, 2014). In particular, manga, anime and videogames are grouped together as 'content industry'

as they all produce very similar types of content through different mediums (Manion, 2005), are sold together, and often share their large fanbases.

Manga are cited as playing various roles in Japan such as reflecting on Japanese society (Ogi, 2003); self-expression (Suzuki, 1998); and offering readers escape to a fantasy world (Grigsby, 1998). As with most fictional media, manga encourages readers to consider different real-world scenarios through presenting different consequences while reinforcing norms through the repetition of particular outcomes (Matanle et al. 2014). For instance, the repeated presentation of specific gender constructions in manga may work to convince readers that such constructions of gender depicted are the desirable norm. The effects of such repetitions are then strengthened, given that children are introduced to manga at a young age, and continue to be presented with manga's gender constructions into adulthood (Choo, 2008). In turn, manga are widely considered as an educational source, behaviour guide, and have even been a vehicle for government policies (Matanle et al., 2014). Additionally, manga are described as a social commentary as they regularly present storylines based on current events and issues faced by everyday people (Bryce, Davis & Barber, 2008). Because manga are not a formal, government-produced media, manga artists have a reasonable amount of freedom to address a wide variety of issues through their manga. Female manga artists in particular, have used manga to critique the limitations of being a Japanese woman in a society which has a high rate of gender inequality (Suzuki, 1998). This makes girls' and women's manga a rich source of insight into the desires and struggles of women in Japan. Alternatively, Grigsby (1998) suggests that manga offers an exciting escape into a fantasy world where characters may pursue their desires and live an eventful life outside of the limitations set by the expectations of Japanese society to fit into certain prescribed roles.

There are several different genres of manga comics, each catered towards a different demographic of target audience. Major genres are divided by the audience's gender or age

group, such as shounen (for boys up to 18 years old), shoujo (for women), and seinen manga (for men, 18-30 years old), with each genre then divided into sub-genres. Although in the West, comics are less popular among females and predominantly authored by males, shoujo manga in Japan are incredibly popular, making up about 30% of the entire manga publication industry (Choo, 2008). Further, a study by Norris (2009) reported that more than half of women under 40 and more than three quarters of teenage girls read shoujo manga regularly, a genre authored by women. However, despite the active involvement of women in the production of shoujo manga, sub-genre categories continue to be limited to romance, action and 'ladies comics' (Ogi, 2003), with the latter targeted more towards mature women, whereas men are offered a broader range of sub-genres. These gendered manga are typically centred around storylines which embody traditional femininities and masculinities- the protagonists of boys' and men's manga become men through protecting women, families or the country from enemies, whereas women and girls read about love conquering all obstacles (Toku, 2007). Further, shoujo manga are replete with storylines where love is portrayed as the most important means to happiness, typically through storylines where the female protagonist would meet a 'prince' type character, whom she would rely on to lead her to her 'happily ever after' (Suzuki, 1998).

However, Choo (2008) claims that shoujo manga was not always limited to romance oriented plots. Manga of the 1950s, at a time where female artists were finally becoming accepted within the manga industry, presented plots which didn't feature romance but instead reflected the realities and struggles faced by women in post-war Japan where the protagonist would overcome post-war difficulties or be reunited with lost family members (Toku, 2007). The 1970s was a period of societal changes in Japan, such as the declining birth-rate, more opportunities for women in the workplace, and an improvement in domestic appliances resulting in housewives having more time and taking up new identities outside the home.

Consistent with these changes, popular shoujo manga of the 1970s and 1980s diversified and presented storylines which focused on female characters who escaped the traditional housewife position and prioritised various other goals outside the home such as career, sports, art, entertainment and even politics (Choo, 2008). Further, this era brought about a shift away from traditional storylines where women relied on men and romance for happiness. However, the 1990s saw a revival of romantic plots in shoujo manga, which primarily featured the female protagonist's search for a romantic partner. Aspirations to fulfilment of romantic desire within shoujo manga may be read as being consistent with a traditional femininity discourse. A twist to this traditional norm, however, is that a woman is now the pursuer of romance rather than the object of pursuit by a male protagonist. This change of role from passive to active accords with the postfeminist era of the 1990s which encouraged women to actively pursue their desires and goals (Love & Helmbrecht, 2007).

The women in contemporary manga appear to be restricted to a few roles; i) sub-characters who are simply valued for their heterosexually attractive appearance ii) women in superheroine groups and iii) more relatable women depicted as facing the same every day events and problems as their Japanese audience. These characters all portray roles which align with changes of Japanese society through time, with women slowly becoming more powerful overall and increasingly taking on roles outside of the traditional household. For example, where the female character in women's manga was previously placed within a 'shoujo' subject position, embodying an image of young, sexless, innocent and 'cute', she now commonly embodies postfeminist ideologies through a fusion of hyper-femininities and once male-exclusive masculinities (Gwynne, 2013). Such postfeminist subjectivities are reviewed in the following section.

Postfeminist 'Empowerment' in Manga

Postfeminist media construct the aesthetic qualities of the female body as being central to femininity, consistently presenting homogenous images of the 'ideal body' (Gill, 2007). Contemporary manga characters are all drawn to a specific style, reflective of this 'ideal body', which has become the fundamental identifying feature of manga today. Grigsby (1998) lists the typical physical traits of both male and female manga characters as having large round eyes, blonde, red or brown hair, long legs and a thin body, and suggests that these characteristics reflect Western ideal physical characteristics despite characters being introduced as Japanese. Although manga characters were previously drawn with Japanese physical traits, their appearance changed after Japan increasingly came into contact with the Western world. However, the depiction of Western physical traits as ideal or superior to Asian physical traits is commonplace within all Asian media, and not limited to manga. Fashion models in magazines are regularly presented made-over with cosmetics and *Photoshop* editing designed to make them appear more European (Li et al., 2008). Grigsby (1998) further suggests that such presentation of unattainable traits motivates the consumption of products which claim to assist one in changing their appearance and attaining the Western features. This Westernisation of women presented in the Asian media aligns with the makeover paradigm (see p.40) described as dominant in postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2007). The influence of these beauty ideals is evident through the fact that the most popular form of cosmetic surgery in Asian women is arguably physical modifications undertaken in order to attain Western facial characteristics, such as blepharoplasty, where the upper eyelid is modified to create a wider eyed look, and nose sculpting surgery (Kaw, 1993).

A further key postfeminist notion of women's 'empowerment' is depicted in manga through the superheroine character, who embodies strength, assertiveness and independence. The superheroine characters emerged in the 1990s, and quickly became a popular genre for

young Japanese girls. Their strength and independence are a stark contrast to the traditional depictions of feminine characteristics such as fragility and reliance on men, presented to young girls globally through products such as *Disney Princesses* and *Barbie* (Grigsby, 1998). Superheroines are praised by feminists as they appear to eliminate sexist stereotypes which assume females are not physically fit, strong, or have the ability to fight as equals to men, alternatively presenting examples of powerful female protagonists who manage to do so (Fantone, 2003). However, Grigsby (1998) argues that postfeminist rather than feminist ideals are asserted within shoujo superheroine manga, as the characters she analysed in *Sailor Moon* are depicted as relying on makeup and jewellery for their powers. Such practices underscore the encouragement of self-surveillance and improvement through the purchase and use of makeup and jewellery in postfeminist media (Lazar, 2011).

Further, Gwynne (2013) claims that despite the regular discussion regarding superheroine manga character within literature, it is important to address the roles of ordinary Japanese women in manga as they represent a more ‘reality-grounded’ picture of Japanese women’s ‘empowerment’ and gender issues. Unlike superheroines, they are relatable to readers as they are also unable to become ‘empowered’ by fictional superhuman abilities. Choo (2008) found that most shoujo manga protagonists of the 1990s and 2000s present an embodiment of ‘empowerment’ within postfeminist discourses. The characters were often depicted as equally independent and physically as strong as male characters, consistent with the ‘Girl Power’ expressions of postfeminism (Taft, 2004), while simultaneously as heterosexually attractive and sexy (McRobbie, 2004). For example, the ‘Japanese schoolgirl’ position offered by manga embodies such notions of postfeminism, while reflecting a shift in power-relations between men and women. Their sexy, assertive, sometimes aggressive characteristics contrast the traditional depiction of young female characters that were sexless and described as the ‘non-threatening female’, referring to their passive characteristics and

lack of sexual agency (Napier, 1998). Gwynne (2013) found that although characters he analysed in male-authored manga titles continued to be drawn in the typical manga style to appear childlike and innocent, they are now highly sexualised through the eroticized presentation of her body (short school skirt, exposure of body) and seductive behaviours which are constructed as weapons of empowerment over the male characters. The eroticization of the female body may be read as the empowerment of women within a postfeminist discourse, as the maintenance of well-groomed appearance and heterosexual attractiveness is marketed with strong associations to success and power in postfeminist media (Gauntlett, 2008).

Postfeminism further constructs the eroticized woman as being empowered as they are depicted with sexual agency, in control of the ways their bodies are presented, and are able to use their eroticized bodies to manipulate male characters. Postfeminism claims to legitimize female sexuality through its claim that women are given the choice to be sexy when they want to, be the initiators of sex, and obtain enjoyment and power through doing so (McRobbie, 2004, Gill, 2007). Such depictions illustrate a contrast to the world-wide traditional ideologies which scrutinize female sexual agency and sexuality, through practices such as ‘slut-shaming’ (Ringrose & Reynold, 2012). However, the sexually empowered female characters which feature in shoujo manga do not indicate that female sexuality has become more accepted by Japanese society, as it only appears within the fantasy realm of manga. Contemporary Japanese media other than shoujo manga continue to constrain female sexuality, presenting scenarios where women are ‘disempowered’- commonly as victims of rape or unable to enjoy sex (Gwynne, 2013). For instance, the two most commonly heard words in Japanese pornography from women are ‘stop’, and ‘it hurts’ (McGregor, 1996).

Postfeminism also claims ‘empowerment’ through a rejection of traditional femininities. To further reiterate notions of ‘Girl Power’ and the postfeminist argument which

claims that females can do anything men can do, shoujo manga also produce notions of ‘empowerment’ through alternative female subjectivities which are depicted alongside more traditionally masculine characteristics (Choo, 2008). Contemporary female protagonists of shoujo manga are regularly constructed as such, while in contrast, the male protagonists are increasingly depicted as possessing traditionally feminine, ‘ladylike’ characteristics. This was illustrated in the titles Choo analysed, which followed the popular ‘poor, everyday girl meets wealthy prince-like character’ narrative, where the wealthy male protagonists’ polite and graceful mannerisms and interest in personal beauty and fashion, were contrasted to the poorer female protagonist who was depicted as outspoken, physically aggressive, impolite, and with little interest about beauty routines and fashion. However, the female protagonist in one of the titles analysed is bullied and rejected by the other characters (including the male protagonist initially) due to her unfashionable dress and lack of cosmetic skill. Choo suggests that other than her poorer background, her inability to behave as feminine as her male counterpart positioned her as lower than him on a power structure. On the other hand, her rough mannerisms may be read within postfeminist ideology as a form of ‘empowerment’ as she has refused to conform to the gendered expectations for her to align herself to traditional femininity, and is instead able to express her own identity and opinions. Choo also identified ‘Cinderella’ type manga narratives which depicted female characters as choosing to struggle along on low-wage jobs rather than accepting the opportunity to become a wealthy housewife. This choice may be further read as a postfeminist construction of ‘empowerment’ as this character has chosen independence over becoming a wealthy housewife and relying on a man financially.

A further rejection of traditional femininity is reflected in manga where the once glamorised depictions of motherhood have slowly diminished. Matanle et al. (2014) suggests that Japanese society places pressure on women to abandon their careers in order to marry

and become 'good' full-time mothers. Much of the manga for women have portrayed the experience of motherhood as desirable and depict it as the ultimate life goal for women after marriage. However, some contemporary genres serve as an exception, as mothers are increasingly portrayed negatively. Suzuki (1998) found an increase in examples where mothers were depicted in manga as troubled, murderers or emotionally unavailable, and suggested that such examples are often used in storylines to allow the protagonist to become more independent, as a mother's role in manga often sets the protagonist up to be reliant on her. Nonetheless, despite the abandonment of the traditional ideal of motherhood, the importance of family and love remains a dominant theme in the comics.

Yaoi manga are a unique genre of ladies comics, as it is a genre written for women by women which presents male protagonists rather than females. Although the protagonists in yaoi manga are always male, they are important to address when considering the constructions of women in manga for several reasons. Yaoi is unique from other romantic genres as it is a parody genre featuring the male protagonists of existing comics in short homosexual romantic storylines. The yaoi genre originated in the 1970s as both a reflection of feminist confrontation to gender restrictions and as an alternative to the generic traditional, heterosexual romance stories which dominated women's manga. Suzuki (1998) has suggested that yaoi challenges the traditional construction of women where they are presented 'to be looked at' (Mulvey, 1989), by instead presenting the male protagonists in both eroticized and mocking ways to be observed by women. Further, Suzuki suggests that yaoi allows female authors to construct a purely ideal, fantasy relationship through the notion that homosexual relationships are both an unknown realm and free from the restrictions and inequalities associated with heterosexual relationships. Readers are offered an alternative to the mainstream storylines based on heterosexual relationships which often heavily feature themes around heterosexual problems such as unwanted pregnancy and gender inequalities. Suzuki

suggests that the male protagonists of yaoi offer the female readers a character to identify with which instead focuses on the ways the protagonist responds to the relationship both emotionally and sexually. Suzuki's investigation also found that storylines which featured female protagonists impersonating males were constructed as ideal relationships, as they are free from a male dominant figure. However, she argues that the author of classic 1970s manga *Rose of Versailles*, which featured such a relationship, may have felt it necessary to establish further equality through raising the female protagonist's class and depicting the male character with a physical disability. Nonetheless, she found that in contrast to yaoi, such equalities are lost once the female protagonist falls in love and she ultimately readopts her female identity. Although the yaoi genre is often explored in feminist literature which claims that yaoi is a popular genre (Suzuki, 1998), it has been argued that yaoi makes up an insignificant proportion of the manga market (Choo, 2008), and that Western literature often constructs a false impression that it is more widespread than it actually is.

Traditional Femininity in Manga

The previous section explored the different women's roles portrayed by manga characters who may be read as constituted within a postfeminist discourse, reflecting both the ways in which Japanese society has embraced postfeminist ideals, and the equality which the manga authors continue to desire. The overarching issue discussed prior, however, was Japanese society's lack of gender equality and its related restrictive traditional gender roles. The current section explores some of the traditional women's roles reflected within modern manga.

Romantic plotlines or domestic issues around home and family dominate the 'ladies' comics' genre (Ogi, 2003), both which reflect notions of traditional femininity. The 'ladies' comics genre is generally understood to be a medium which both conveys young women's

desires, and presents role models to young female readers. They primarily present scenarios based around the struggles faced by every day, 'normal' women (as opposed to those with superpowers) in a Japanese society which lags behind other developed countries in employment equality and instead supports a domestic, housewife lifestyle for women (Ogi, 2003). Ogi claims that the most common desires of women portrayed in ladies comics may be characterised within both a postfeminist and traditional discourse- one desire being sexual pleasure, the other being the goal of a happy marriage. She argues that the latter desire reinforces the traditional housewife role, and restricts women to this role through presenting a successful marriage and motherhood as the only method to happiness, while other goals are positioned within storylines as less important.

Choo's (2008) content analysis study found that the roles of female protagonists in shoujo manga also regularly constructed the traditional positions such as a domestic housewife or mother alongside traditional femininities of gentleness and emotional fluency. The female protagonists of Choo's study played the role of mothers and caregivers to the male protagonist through cooking and cleaning for him, and providing him with emotional support. Somewhat dubiously, Choo suggests that domestic abilities are portrayed as empowering the female protagonist, as she is portrayed as being able to take care of herself within the domicile, whereas the male protagonist is reliant on a mother figure to cook for him and clean after him. In such storylines where the young male protagonists' mothers were regularly absent from the household, the mothers were constructed as successful career-oriented women who fail at their motherly roles and are often portrayed negatively as cold, 'bad' mothers. Such depictions reflect the traditional beliefs that women who choose to pursue their career over becoming a full-time mother are unable to maintain a close, warm relationship with their children.

Another major characteristic of manga characters is their ‘cuteness’. Manga style can be described as being created within the Japanese ‘kawaii culture’, which translates to ‘cute culture’ in English. The kawaii culture emerged in Japanese media in the 1980s (Kinsella, 1995) and has become a staple style in manga culture, as both male and female characters are constructed as being ‘cute’ through both their appearance and their behaviours. Although female characters are often heavily sexualised, their image is also portrayed in conjunction with the cute image, which generally involves the presentation of characters to look and speak like a child. Most commonly, Kinsella suggests that the Japanese notion of cute also involves connotations of disability and weakness. This is supported by Choo’s (2008) finding that female manga characters are often presented simultaneously as pitiful, yet strong spirited. This idea of ‘pitiful’ is often depicted through the previously mentioned ‘Cinderella’ storylines - the female protagonist often comes from a poorer, lower class background than the male protagonist, and can only achieve happiness through hard work and determination, making her both ‘cute’ and strong. Choo found that manga plots often involve the female protagonist taking on traditional, domestic roles such as housecleaner under the male protagonist, and then eventually winning his heart. While her determination and hard work contributes to a protagonist’s ‘cuteness’, it is also portrayed within the manga as strength, albeit not within feminist discourse.

Similar to the ways in which manga have addressed the gender constructions within other domains, those which feature women in the workplace reflect both the changes Japan has made and failed to make towards gender equality. Matanle et al. (2014) found that manga for both men and women presented the roles of women in a workplace setting within a traditional discourse, and over the decade they had observed from 1990 to 2000, very little change was reflected in the roles. Although the feminist influence is evident on the basis where the female protagonists of manga have moved away from traditional roles based

around their exclusively domestic lifestyles and into the workplace, the storylines of women's comics continue to suggest that women place higher importance in love and marriage, and that their working style differs to that of men. For example, Matanle et al. observed the manga for women *Kimi wa Petto* where the female protagonist initially is depicted as a career focused woman, but becomes less so when she meets a man. From this point, the storyline turns to romance and she is shown to be at the workplace less. Further, they found that women's roles in the workplace in men's manga are reduced to subordinate work roles, romantic conquests for the male protagonist or as dependent caregivers, and rarely contribute to the storyline. Instances which feature the workplace as the main theme within a ladies' comic and where the female protagonist is depicted as hard-working and successful in other manga are presented as a novelty. In the manga *Hataraki-man*, the female protagonist is introduced as a competitive hard-worker, therefore earning her the reputation of working 'like a man', which is also the English translation of the manga title (Matanle et al., 2014). The highlighted depiction of her work-style as unnatural for a woman supports the traditional notion which suggests that men and women have very different labour roles. Moreover, it also suggests that although it is a norm for men to work hard, women place higher importance in other aspects of their lives such as love and family.

Female characters are rarely depicted in managerial positions, consistent with the labour structure of Japanese society where women continue to be seen as incapable of making important decisions. Additionally, women's activities in the workplace are rarely depicted as important, in contrast to the activities of the male protagonists whose successes and important decisions made within his superior role in the workplace continue to be amplified and often form the basis of the main storyline. However, in the rare case where female characters pursue a career above traditional domestic duties appear in manga, they are depicted as driven but lacking in femininity (Grigsby, 1998). Matanle et al. (2014) found that the career

oriented female character of a manga they analysed was depicted with over-exaggerated postfeminist characteristics, such as her lack of humility, ruthlessness and sexual forwardness. Although such characteristics are celebrated in Japanese men, these characteristics are exaggerated in females. This in turn portrays the character in a negative light, and positions her as problematic for the male protagonist, leading to her downfall. The problematizing of such characteristics resonates with the moral panic around the 'ladette' subjectivity in the West (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). Both Grigsby and Matanle et al. also found that career oriented female characters are often portrayed without love or a family, suggesting that women must decide between either furthering a career or raising a family. Although successful and career oriented female characters are sometimes featured in Japanese manga, they are depicted negatively and their individuality, power and other feminist characteristics are short-lived as they usually either sacrifice their careers for a domesticated life, or eventually undertake subordinate roles in relation to the male characters. These depictions are not short of reality, as the majority of highly qualified Japanese women leave their careers after marriage or motherhood as they are unhappy with their dull jobs or lack of opportunity (Kimura, 2007).

Although Ogi (2003) critiques the repetition of traditional femininity produced by manga as having a detrimental influence on consumers, she acknowledges that such representations can convey realistic limitations for women that are set by Japanese society. For example, the genre 'ladies comics' offers a medium to address more serious women's issues such as rape and abuse where, although scenarios portray women as 'disempowered', characters may serve as realistic role models who are 'empowered' through coping with the consequences. Another regularly addressed 'real' issue presented in ladies comics is the unhappy marriage which, Ogi claims, is a shift away from manga which had previously presented the idea of marriage within the traditional discourse as a means to an end. Although

other genres of female manga often position women within more powerful roles with more exciting occupations and lifestyles (Fujimoto, 1994), such roles may be considered as unattainable and merely fantasies , therefore depicting characters which readers cannot relate to.

Manga and Digital Media

Manga's derivatives offer consumers a deeper connection to the fantasy manga world through animated adaptations and interactive video games. For instance, several large video game companies in Japan regularly release a genre of video games called 'dating simulators' or more commonly *dating-sim* games (Docent & Glas, 2011), which effectively simulate a relationship with the female manga-styled character in the game. Kinsella (1998) suggests that the contemporary display of postfeminist assertiveness through sexuality has become a threat to young Japanese men who continue to position women within traditional constructions of femininity, and find it difficult to interact with the modern woman. The *dating-sim* genre transports the player into a fantasy world as a male protagonist where he is popular with the female characters and his ultimate goal is to either have a successful relationship or have sex with the female protagonist. Most importantly, the game allows the player to be the active pursuer of the relationship, placing him in a position of assertiveness which, as mentioned above, has become difficult for men who have not adjusted to the modern, postfeminist woman who may pursue the relationship herself. The gender constructions in the game reflect femininity within a traditional discourse where women are positioned as the passive partner in the relationship. The male protagonist chooses the female, pursues the female, and makes all the choices pertaining to the relationship, while the female protagonist simply follows his lead. Docent and Glas (2011) claim that the female protagonists of the games share some key characteristics which illustrate the 'ideal' female to the target audience such as having a quiet personality, being shy, possessing long hair and

wearing a cute outfit. The passive characteristics reflect traditional femininity, allowing male players to reclaim their dominant position within the fantasy relationship. Docent and Glas (2011) suggest that *dating-sims* are used by some consumers as an educational tool which provides non-threatening environments to experiment with social interactions.

Problematically, when it is placed in an educational position of influence, the gender roles offered within the games become important as many players lack exposure to real women and unsuccessfully learn traditional gender roles which are increasingly becoming socially unacceptable.

The passive natures of these female characters are also conveyed through the presentation of their bodies. As discussed in the section about constructions of traditional femininity, postfeminism positions women as ‘empowered’ by their sexuality and desirability, while their aesthetic presentation is constructed as self-chosen. However, women’s bodies are regularly presented as eroticized within a sexual objectification discourse, which positions the viewer as the power holder, and her body as a sexual object ‘to-be-looked-at’ (Mulvey, 1989). In children’s manga, Gwynne (2013) found female characters were regularly presented provocatively through the presentation of short skirts blowing up and young schoolgirl characters with fully developed bodies. She claims that children’s manga are not only enjoyed by children but often by Japanese male fans who are sexually attracted to the manga characters and are massive consumers of goods related to the titles. Pornographic parodies of mainstream manga are often marketed to this audience, and are criticized for glorifying themes of rape and sexual violence (Perper & Cornog, 2002). The eroticized depictions of female characters in Japanese videogames are also often criticized by feminists, as feminine body parts such as breasts are regularly exaggerated and exposed (Fantone, 2003), positioning characters as nothing more than ‘to be looked at’. Fantone found that the female video game characters and manga characters share similar physical

characteristics- large eyes, big breasts, and long hair, and criticized their unrealistic body proportions. She found a particular instance where players are encouraged to position the female characters as sexual objects in the Japanese video game *Dead or Alive*, also successful in the US, where players are given the choice to customise the ways the bikini-clad female characters' large breasts bounce. She further claims that the steadily increasing breast size of the female characters and the repeated presentation of this particular body type in popular media reproduce the 'ideal woman's body' as having exaggerated feminine body parts. The continuation and popularity of these genres which advocate traditional and gender inequality accord with both a continuation of gender role disparity in Japanese society, and the mainstream acceptance of such ideals and of hostile attitudes towards the empowerment of women. The digital derivatives of manga were excluded from this research as they are not as widely consumed in Japan as manga. Further, digital derivatives such as video games are often open-ended, unlike manga which produces straightforward narrations to its audiences, rendering it more appropriate for this study.

The Current Study

The key goal of this research is to examine the extent to which manga works to reproduce and challenge gender inequality. Conversely, this research also investigates the ways in which postfeminist influences are incorporated into manga. Motivating the research is the potential effects of manga for audiences, specifically the possibilities for femininities manga make available to young women and, in particular, those which work to limit and constrain. These possibilities are of particular concern for their potential to normalise negative versions of femininity amongst a large and globally dispersed audience.

Previous literature has used content analysis approach to research manga (e.g. Grigsby, 1998, Ogi, 2003). Although content analysis is useful in investigating the content of

media, it is limited by its attention to statistically more prevalent findings and obscuring of more unique, yet available findings (Krippendorff, 2012). The research in this thesis employs a discursive approach that will provide a more complex and nuanced analysis through exploring meanings and contradictions within manga femininities. Further, much of the previous literature generalises findings from analysis of outdated, unpopular or uncommon manga genres and titles, selected for their uniqueness and shock value. In contrast, this research adopts a stance of open inquiry in seeking to identify constructions of femininity presented within modern (2000-2015) Japanese manga across different genres. As mentioned earlier, much of the available literature has limited its interests to femininities such as superheroine and romantic interest characters. Working from a feminist poststructuralist framework, the study will explore the relationship between the different key femininities produced in manga and the current socio-cultural Japanese context. Put simply, the study aims to identify the key constructions of femininity made available in popular, modern manga and to consider their implications for young female audiences.

Chapter Two

Methodology

This chapter presents the study's methodological framework and method of analysis. It begins by discussing the feminist poststructuralist framework for the research, specifically focusing on the understandings it offers us in relation to language, power and discourse. Following this discussion of the theoretical framework, the next section sets out the analytical approach informed by it. Thematic analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis are described in detail, followed by brief descriptions of the manga titles selected for analysis. Finally, the chapter addresses a reflexive account of my role in the research.

Feminist Poststructuralism

A feminist poststructuralist framework appropriates poststructuralist theorist Michael Foucault's work on discourses and questioning of the ways subjectivities and power relationships are constructed through them (Willig, 2001). However, Foucault's theorisation did not address gender and it has been elaborated by feminists to include the gendered power structures made available in language through discourse. There is no singular definition of poststructuralism and the avoidance of a definition reflects researchers' concerns about oversimplification and the fact that a set definition would defy its whole point of being an open concept (Gavey, 1989). Weedon (1987) describes poststructuralism as offering ways to identify power structures and find ways to change them, using theories of language, subjectivity, social process and institutions. She claims that it differs from mainstream psychology's 'liberal humanist' approach, which disagrees with the notion of analysing subjectivities and discourse while unquestioningly accepting a 'common sense' theory as a basis for all knowledge. Although such approaches emphasise the importance of considering human rights and individuality, Weedon suggests that liberal humanism's exclusion of power

relations renders it inappropriate for feminist psychologies. The majority of mainstream feminist psychology continues to employ a liberal humanist approach, considering women's experience as a singular truth, and regarding language as singularly a reflection of women's experience (Gavey, 1989). The poststructuralist framework, however, emphasises existing power relations while holding language as essential to the expression and understanding of experience (Weedon, 1987), and has been described as being particularly useful to feminist practices, due to its conceptualisation of multiple truths. Weedon explains that feminism assumes an overwhelmingly patriarchal society, giving men the power to create 'truths' which are beneficial to males for maintaining the social hierarchy. She claims that much of society's law and order is heavily influenced by such patriarchal 'truths'. For example, although Anglo-American societies claim that women are equal to men, they also hold women and men to being different, women being "naturally" created for different roles, primarily as wife and mother (Josephson & Burack, 1998). Such 'truths' serve to associate women with characteristics such as gentleness and kindness, which in turn exclude women from careers associated with aggressive, management and business roles and instead restricts them to traditionally feminine occupations such as nursing and teaching (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). It is such experiences which have inspired poststructuralist feminists to question such singular 'truths' and consider them as simply offering meaning through one of many discourses (Gavey, 1989).

Language, Power and Discourse

Research within a poststructuralist framework embodies its theory of language, power and discourse as key to meaning. Language plays a particularly important role in poststructuralism, as it theorises that all meaning and knowledge is established by it (Weedon, 1987). Weedon explains the importance of language through Saussure's language theory, following the notion that the meaning of a subject is dependent on context (as cited in

Weedon, 1987). In feminist scholarship, this theory is particularly evident in observing the different possible readings and subject positions made available to women through language and its consequences.

According to poststructuralist theory, the maintenance of a society's power structure is upheld through the existence and perpetration of dominant discourses. As Gavey (1989) explains, "those who have the power to regulate what counts as truth are able to maintain their access to material advantages and power" (p. 462). In turn, through power, certain discourses are privileged over others. The theory of discourses, as established by Michael Foucault, describes discourses as a collection of ideologies and structures which form the basis of society (Hollway, 1983). Discourses offer multiple ways of "giving meaning to the world" (Gavey, 1989, p. 464), and offer subject positions which individuals can position themselves within (Weedon, 1987). Dominant discourses are often accepted as 'truth' about a phenomenon, and become 'common sense' (Gavey, 1989). Weedon (1987) claims that consequent to dominant discourses which predominantly serve the interests of men, ideologies which restrict the interests of women in multiple ways are legitimized and accepted.

However, powerful discourses are constantly being contested by alternative discourses (Hollway, 2001). Individuals actively choose to position themselves within or outside given discourses (Gavey, 1989). When individuals position themselves within a discourse, their emotions, bodies and actions are governed by it (Weedon, 1987). This points to the importance of identifying power structures within language and text when undertaking poststructuralist research. Poststructuralist research considers the possible power structures within texts through the analysis of ways objects are constructed and identifying who such constructions would serve while placing limitations upon others. For example, feminist researchers are most interested in finding ways in which gender is constructed, and whether

such constructions serve to maintain dominant patriarchal ideologies while restricting the interests of women.

A poststructuralist discursive approach is valuable to feminist researchers as the knowledge of available and dominant discourses allows researchers to analyse them and identify problematic areas of society which place limitations on women in terms of equality and rights (Weedon, 1987). There are several different types of discourse analysis, differing predominantly through their frameworks, their processes, and what they prioritise. The current study implements a form of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis which will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

Analytical Approach

There were two stages in the analysis of manga texts; a thematic analysis and a Foucauldian discourse analysis. The following section describes each of the forms of analysis.

Thematic Analysis

In order to identify and analyse the key themes within the manga data, a thematic analysis was conducted. Although researchers rarely acknowledge the thematic analysis process in their studies, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the importance of selecting data and identifying possible themes in order to ensure a significant and strong analysis. Due to its flexibility to be conducted within a wide variety of frameworks, thematic analysis does not follow set rules or processes in its execution. However, the analysis I conducted follows guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke, who have outlined the fundamental considerations and phases of a thematic analysis following data collection. The initial phase, *familiarising yourself with your data* consists of actively searching the data repeatedly for patterns and meanings while noting possible meanings, themes, and anything else which makes the data

item interesting. This is followed by *generating initial codes*, where particularly interesting and useful features of the data are identified and ‘coded’ with descriptions of what was occurring within the data item. These codes and their associated data items are then organised into thematic files in the *searching for themes* stage. Through the production of a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis, the relevance of the themes to the research are judged based on their relation to the previously coded data items and the complete data set during a *reviewing themes* phase. The final phase in regards to the study, *defining and naming themes*, involves identifying and naming the overarching themes from each thematic file. Following this process outlined by Braun and Clarke, the themes extracted for this study included ‘domestic’, ‘obsession with romance’ and ‘childlike’. Discarded themes included ‘overemotional’, ‘over talkative’ and ‘materialistic’ as they were of less relevance to my research questions.

Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis

The second stage of analysis used a form of Foucauldian discourse analysis, drawing on Willig’s (2001) work, to analyse constructions of femininity in the data. Foucauldian discourse analysis provides a useful tool for critically engaging with texts and considering the potential power relations within them, which is of particular relevance to an analysis of gender. A Foucauldian informed analysis identifies the multiple ways a discursive object is constructed within texts, and considers the social consequences such constructions may have. Although many methods of analysis are limited to worded texts, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis allows researchers to study a wide range of materials (Parker & the Bolton Discourse Network, 1999). Foucauldian Discourse Analysis is particularly useful within the current research as the presentation of pictures play an important part in the manga texts. Further, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis’ emphasis on considering discourses within socio-historical contexts (Burr, 1995) allows this research to consider findings within a Japanese

context while offering different possibilities and comparisons within a Western context. In this study, the discursive object is femininity. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis is specifically concerned with subjectivity or sense of self that discourses make available. For this study, analysis is centrally concerned with the possibilities for being a young woman that are made available through the discourses of femininity present in the manga analysed.

The process of analysis broadly followed the stages outlined by Willig (2001). The initial stage identifies the different ways in which the discursive object in question is constructed in the texts. The second stage identifies the different possible discourses each of the constructions could draw on. In the context of my research, identifying discourses regarding what may be deemed desirable femininity in Japanese society was of particular interest. As mentioned earlier, subjectivity is a key feature of Foucauldian discourse analysis, and after discourses have been identified, analysis focuses on the identification of subject positions offered by the discourses. Dominant discourses limit the social acceptability of alternative subject positions, which is of crucial importance and relevance to feminist studies. Accordingly, examining both possibilities and restrictions imposed by different subject positions is a key aspect of this analysis.

Data

The manga analysed in this study draw from manga series which feature key female characters. The manga titles were selected on the basis of several criteria. First, data were limited to Japanese manga, and did not include titles from manhua (Chinese comics), manhwa (South Korean manga) or original English-language manga (American manga), in order to keep the analysis within a Japanese context. However, it must be noted that the manga texts analysed in this study were those which were previously translated into English. Secondly, the manga as a series had to be ‘popular’ between years 2000-2015. Popularity was

measured based on several internet sources (top 10 lists, websites which provide manga, etc.). The reason for gauging popularity was to ensure that the selected manga were a fair representation of manga widely consumed in Japan, as opposed to interesting yet non-mainstream texts (Choo, 2008). Thirdly, the selected manga had to have a significant part of its series in circulation between the years 2000-2015. This was in order to keep the study historically relevant. The final criterion was more pragmatic: the manga had to be available in New Zealand, whether in bookstores or online.

Selection of manga titles was not restricted to particular genres, popularity being more important for the research as popular titles reach a wider audience. However, the manga titles were not simply selected from popularity and sales lists, as it was found that the top positions on such lists were dominated by titles grouped under those aimed at a shounen (young men/boys) demographic and contained homogenous themes. The manga titles selected for analysis were selected after reading both a summary of plotlines and the first few chapters of each manga title in order to avoid repetition of content. Most of the 'top' shounen manga titles were found to feature an overlapping plotline, where a heroic male protagonist triumphs over his enemies through friendship, superpowers and perseverance, and so were consequently discarded. Ultimately, this process led to the selection of two manga titles aimed at a female demographic and two titles aimed at males: *Death Note*, *Gintama*, *Absolute Boyfriend* and *NANA*. Although the selected titles were not the 'top 5 most popular manga series in Japan', each title nonetheless consistently rated as highly popular on many manga websites, and all four titles have been adapted into other media forms such as anime shows, television dramas, videogames and films. The following section briefly describes each manga title selected for analysis.

Death Note

Death Note is a short manga series consisting of 12 volumes, circulating 2003-2006. Due to its popularity, several adaptations of the manga have been released through media platforms such as anime, video games and even live action films. *Death Note*'s demographic aims at a shounen (young men/boys) readership, but features serious, mature themes (e.g. questioning the justice system, abusive relationships) and plotlines. The central plot features the high school genius and policeman's son Light Yagami, who finds a supernatural notebook which has the ability to kill anyone whose name is written into it. Light secretly takes on the identity of 'Kira' (killer), and takes justice into his own hands to create a world "cleansed of evil", by eliminating criminals. Meanwhile, the police, alongside genius detective 'L', are working to identify 'Kira' and bring his murders to an end. Although main characters of *Death Note* are overwhelmingly male, the female character Misa Amane is heavily featured. Misa also possesses a *Death Note* but is taken advantage of by Light due to her projected lack of intelligence and unrequited love for him.

Gintama

Gintama is an ongoing Japanese manga series consisting of 58 volumes to date, circulating from 2003. It has sold over 44 million copies in Japan, and has had anime, film, novels and video game adaptations. Its main demographic is made up of shounen (young men), but has been popular among those outside this demographic. *Gintama* is set in an alternative version of the historic 'Edo' period (between 1603-1868), presenting a world where traditional Japan clashes with the invasion of the 'Amanto' aliens, who noticeably carry the ideologies and lifestyles of the West. The plot follows the adventures of the protagonists; samurai Gintoki Sakata, Shinpachi Shimura, and teenage alien girl Kagura, who encounter several other Japanese characters who, due to the alien invasion, are trying to preserve their

traditional Japanese ways of living and culture. Although *Gintama* is a comedy, it differs to most manga as it seriously addresses current social issues in Japan such as social inequality and the clashing of Japanese traditional culture and Western culture.

Absolute Boyfriend

Absolute boyfriend is a shoujo (for women) manga series consisting of six volumes, which circulated from 2003-2005. The manga has been adapted into a live-action drama series in 2008, while a Taiwanese adaption aired in 2012, and plans are underway for a South Korean adaption. The plot features a young woman, Riiko Izawa, who yearns for a romantic relationship, but has always been rejected by boys. She meets a salesman for the technology company 'Kronos Heaven', who offers Riiko the chance to trial a robotic lover who looks like a human male. She dubiously agrees, and takes ownership over the robot 'Night'. However, Night is a unique robot who begins to reject his software and develops self-awareness and real human thoughts and feelings. As the manga progresses, Riiko gradually develops feelings towards him.

NANA

NANA is a Japanese manga series consisting of 21 volumes to date, circulating from 2000-2009. The manga has been adapted into two very popular films, and an anime adaption. Its main demographic is made up of josei (young women) due to its adult themes. The plot features the friendship of two female protagonists, who share the name 'Nana', but have contrasting personalities. Nana Osaki is a singer in a punk band, and is positioned as a 'tom boy'. Nana Komatsu (who has been nicknamed in the manga and in this study as Hachi to avoid confusion) is an embodiment of traditionally feminine characteristics. The two meet on a train to Tokyo and soon become close friends, facing issues around love and friendship together.

Reflexivity

It is important to consider my position as researcher within this research, as my own “values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research” (p.10, Willig, 2001). I am a New-Zealand born Japanese woman, who has never lived in Japan, but has grown up in a Japanese household with two Japanese immigrant parents. Much of my knowledge on Japanese culture has been derived from my holidays in Japan, living with my family, Japanese media, Japanese classes and, possibly most influentially, my comparisons between my own upbringing and that of my Western peers.

However, despite my understandings of Japanese culture and ability to consider findings within a Japanese context, all of my theoretical understandings for poststructuralist framework, feminism and discourse for the study were derived from Western literature. It is quite possible that the discourses I have identified cannot be simply considered exclusively within a Japanese context. Although this research does not intend to compare the different subjectivities offered in Japan and in the West, many of my ideas will be informed by my own cultural background in thinking about comparisons between Japanese society and what has been made available through Western literature.

I decided to undertake this research as I have always enjoyed Japanese anime and manga culture, yet have felt frustrated at being part of a culture which is projected through such mediums as being incredibly delayed in terms of gender equality and further, as a Japanese woman, being associated with the limited femininities they offer. As outlined in this chapter, this research sets out to examine the key subjectivities and discourses made available in manga through a feminist poststructuralist lens in the hope that truly empowering femininities would be identified.

Chapter Three

Constructions of Infantilization and Subordination- Death Note

The following two chapters examine constructions of femininity produced within shounen manga. Although shounen manga are technically targeted at a male audience, they are published in bestselling manga volumes that often also attract a female audience. The current chapter explores the ways femininity is constructed in the shounen manga *Death Note*. In particular, it addresses the constructions of infantilization and subordination produced by the female characters.

As the girlfriend of the protagonist/antagonist Light Yagami (nicknamed Kira by the fictional media within the storyline), Misa Amane makes regular appearances throughout *Death Note*, and is central to this analysis. She plays an important role within the storyline as she helps Light achieve his goal to rid the world of criminals. She does this not only through her possession of supernatural abilities but also by deceiving the policemen investigating the ‘Kira case’ through her charisma and charm. Despite her helpfulness and apparent supernatural powers, Misa is infantilized and depicted negatively within subjectivities of the ‘girlish woman’ and the ‘dumb blonde’ and consistently constructed as an unintelligent hindrance to Light. Depictions of other female characters are also infantilized, creating a normalizing effect of young women as childlike, dependent, and in need of protection.

The Cute Woman

In the case of Misa, girlishness is evident in her embodiment of hyper-femininity and youthfulness. Within Japanese culture, girlishness is strongly associated with cute or ‘kawaii culture’, which celebrates petiteness, vulnerable and innocent social behaviours, and physical appearance (Kinsella, 1995). The Japanese ‘kawaii culture’, or ‘cute culture’ in English, has consistently dominated Japanese media since the 1980s, and has popularised everything

constructed as 'kawaii', leading many Japanese adults to strive for a 'kawaii' appearance (Maynard & Taylor, 1999). Consistent with 'kawaii culture', Misa is presented as an attractive female embodiment of a cute manga character. Her face has been drawn with a pointed chin, large round eyes, and a small mouth. Her hair is pulled up into pig-tails, and she is posed pigeon toed. Further, Misa wears gothic 'Lolita' clothing. In Japan, the Lolita subculture embodies an aesthetic of adult women dressing like a Victorian-era childlike doll (Winge, 2008). Although Lolita is commonly associated in the West with young female sexuality as characterised by *Lolita* in Nabokov's novel of the same name (1955) and with notions of paedophilia, Japanese Lolita fashion comprises a specific, hyperfeminine dress code (abundance of lace, bows, childlike dress), that covers up breasts, a body part considered a symbol of undesirable maturity by women positioned within Lolita culture. Misa dresses as a gothic Lolita, a sub-type of Lolita influenced by post-punk and horror themes, characterized by darker makeup and black clothing. Through its unique aesthetic, the subcultural Lolita style embodies notions of rebellion against Japanese society's dominant values of conformity and collectivism. Misa's positioning within the subculture is constructed as being advantageous to her career and popularity, as it embodies the hyperfeminine notions of being 'cute' and childlike, which may be read as being consistent with dominant discourses of beauty in Japan.

Aside from her appearance, Misa also projects child-like behaviour. For example, she refers to herself constantly in third person, a way of speaking associated with very young children. Kinsella (1995) has defined the Japanese concept of being 'kawaii' as more than simply presenting a 'cute' aesthetic, rather as an embodiment of being childlike and, relatedly has noted the kawaii culture's association with disability and weakness. Consistent with Kinsella's definition, Misa's 'kawaii' pigeon toed pose, can be read as implying instability and vulnerability (Goffman, 1976). The association of characteristics such as vulnerability,

submission, uncertainty and childlike with femininity is termed ‘infantilization’ within Western literature (Jhally, 2009). The term ‘infantilization’ was initially coined by Levy (1942), as a form of maternal overprotection which encourages one to remain ‘childlike’ through depending on others and a lack of competency. Perhaps the most prominent examples of the infantilization of Misa come from the depiction of her behaviour. For instance, in a scene where Misa and her protective ‘Death God’ Rem are headed towards meeting Light for the first time, Misa’s behaviour is childlike in her response to Rem’s warnings about Light.

Rem: “You’re playing a dangerous game.... You may get killed, you know”

Misa: “It’ll be fine. Kira is probably very gentle to innocent little girls”

In this exchange, where Misa is warned by Rem of the serious danger she is putting herself in, she infantilizes herself through a discourse of childhood innocence, imbued with a naivety that blinds her to danger. In constructing Misa in this way, the producers of the manga portray an unintelligent adult, who is also potentially an unlikeable character for the male audience of the manga who do not strongly identify within the ‘kawaii’ culture.

Although the Japanese postfeminist media often praise ‘kawaii culture’ and infantilization as a form of self-expression and individuality, those positioned within it are also criticized for avoiding maturity and responsibilities (Kinsella, 1995). Goffman (1976) had suggested that the infantilization of women is disempowering, as it positions them as equating to both subordinate males and children. Further, the normalised conflation of childhood submissiveness, innocence and vulnerability with femininity is unfavourable to women in many aspects of life, from the social (e.g. Employment perception of job suitability) to the personal (e.g. Self-confidence). In *Death Note*, the detrimental effects of infantilization are presented through the way other characters treat Misa with disrespect. For

example, Light consistently speaks to her condescendingly, despite the fact that he is still in high school and she is implied to be older. Within the Japanese cultural context, this is unusual because Japanese culture places an emphasis on respecting an age hierarchy. At one point, for example, Light tells Misa to “be a good girl” as he leaves her to go out, rather than addressing her as a woman. This kind of diminishment has been condemned in feminist scholarship (Huot, 2013). When one refers to or treats an adult like a child, they are denying adulthood (Carlson, 2010), which works to disempower them. Further, the phrase “good girl” has often been used in rape scenes to infantilize and patronize women in pornography (Cowan, Lee, Ley & Snyder, 1988). In the case of Light, who is constructed negatively as a narcissistic, condescending and ‘antagonistic’ character, his patronising treatment of Misa is legitimised by the similar ways in which other characters speak to her. L, who is constructed as the ‘good’ character, also refers to her in a condescending tone, as for example when he says “Light, can you please make Misa-san be quiet”. Within a paternalistic discourse, L positions Light as a parental figure, considered responsible for Misa’s behaviour, while Misa is positioned as a small child, who is unable to take responsibility for her own behaviour despite her presence in the room. The parent/child construction positions Light as a powerful adult, in relation to Misa’s position as a dependant, weaker child.

The Ero-Kawaii Woman

Despite her childlike construction and association with the Lolita subculture, Misa is heavily sexualised. Within the last decade, Japanese pop star *Koda Kumi* coined and popularized the construction of women as simultaneously having an ‘erotic’ and ‘kawaii’ appearance as being ‘Ero-kawaii’ (Dale, 2013). The popularisation of the concept challenged traditional Japanese discourses of female sexuality, which had previously connoted the word ‘erotic’ as negative, through associating it with the positive connotations of ‘kawaii’, and in turn constructing ‘erotic’ as a sexual freedom. The reconstruction of ‘sexy’ within Japanese

society is consistent with Western postfeminist constructions of femininity, which prioritise being 'sexy' as a symbol of success and freedom (Gill & Scharff, 2011). However, the fusion of 'cute' and 'sexy' has been critiqued in feminist literature, which alternatively regards it as infantilization. Goffman (1976) defines the simultaneous presentation of adult women as childlike yet sexualised as infantilization, claiming that such depictions are growing in Western media such as advertising. Misa dons sexually provocative, lingerie inspired outfits where the image often entirely fills the comic frame, zoomed in on her intimate body parts such as her bottom and breasts. Her underwear is regularly exposed unnecessarily, such as when she walks up the stairs. One way of reading the construction of Misa in this way is through Mulvey's (1989) notion of the 'male gaze', particularly given the male audience of this manga. That is to say, she is constructed as an erotic object on display for the 'male gaze', constructed as heterosexually titillating and erotic. This is further illustrated through Misa's erotic appearance, as for example, she often appears in lingerie and short skirts while accompanied by men who are shown as watching her. Moreover, Misa is consistently constructed as a passive object of the gaze, as many instances of her underwear being exposed are portrayed as unwilling and outside of her control (for example, as she walks up the stairs or the angle of her skirt). Misa is also regularly posed in a 'canting posture' through the lowering of her body, which Goffman (1976) suggests to be symbolic of appeasement and passive acceptance of the gaze.

However, Misa is also simultaneously constructed as an active subject of the gaze in several instances, such as where she wears lingerie in an attempt to seduce Light, or wears revealing clothing to attend a job interview. This portrayal of Misa is consistent with what Gill (2007) describes as the postfeminist subjectification of women- she claims that a postfeminist discourse of empowerment now renders the sexualisation of women in contemporary media acceptable through the notion it is self-chosen. Put simply, it suggests

that women are no longer ‘passive’, but choosing to style themselves sexually, and to position themselves as active pursuers of sex. Although the sexualisation of women is depicted as unthreatening and eroticized ‘by choice’, as they are rarely overtly forced into sexualising their appearance and apparently to enjoying the male attention, Gill argues that such representations are problematic. She claims that it normalizes the notion that women are ‘always up for it’, which potentially fuels a rape and sexual harassment culture.

The Pretty Woman

Misa’s body is not only observed by men, but is also carefully observed by herself. Self-surveillance had always been a key aspect of a traditional femininity discourse that prescribes the ‘correct’ ways to be a woman (Bartky, 1997). Gill (2007) claims that notions of self-surveillance within postfeminist discourses have escalated dramatically, now covering more aspects of a woman’s life and encouraging women to continuously ‘improve’ and change themselves. Further, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) argue that postfeminist discourses have prescribed a definition of ‘successful femininity’ as heavily based on transformation, regulation and consumption. The postfeminist notions of self-surveillance within a beauty discourse constructs what Gill has called the ‘makeover-paradigm’, within which the female body is constructed as ‘docile’, constantly scrutinized and as perpetually needing improvement (Bartky, 1997). The normalization of an unattainable beauty ‘ideal’ sets women up to be dissatisfied with themselves and to continue to strive for a prescribed ‘perfection’ through active effort and consumerism. However, postfeminism constructs self-surveillance as pleasurable and empowering. For example, models are constructed as enjoying pleasure, empowerment and success through their possession of ‘ideal body’. However, Wolf (1990) defines the role of a model as an “elite corps deployed in a way that keeps 150 million American women in line” (p. 41). Yet, despite being constructed as having attained success, models internationally are placed under pressure to conform to and maintain

a body prescribed by a dominant Western beauty discourse, which prescribes the ideal as being tall, thin, and having a youthful appearance (Bordo, 2004). In other words, they are no more exempt from disciplinary regimes than the woman on the street. As a model, Misa's body is a 'cultural commodity'; she must maintain a prescribed 'ideal' appearance in order to continue her role as a model defining and reinforcing 'idealized femininity' (Barthel, 1989). Misa is depicted as actively maintaining her 'model body' through monitoring her diet. In a scene where the main characters are offered slices of cake, Misa's is left untouched. L, who loves sweet food, notices and comments on her rejection of the cake.

L: "Are you going to eat that cake?"

Misa: "... I watch the sweets because they make you fat..."

L: "If you use your head, you won't get fat, even if you eat sweets"

Misa: "Oh! There you go making fun of me again"

Misa constructs her body as requiring self-surveillance in order to achieve the ideal aesthetic, whereas L simultaneously constructs it as being an unintelligent notion to be concerned about. The postfeminist construction of women's bodies as constantly requiring surveillance in order to possess a sexy body (Gill, 2007) is illustrated through Misa's fear of losing her currently 'ideal' body (slim) and refusal of sweets "because they make you fat". Bartky (1997) has likened the behaviour of self-monitoring within the diet context to the functioning of the Panopticon. In doing so, she draws on Foucault's elaboration of the Panopticon as a model prison, where prisoners can never be sure if they are being watched, and so monitor their own behaviour. Bartky describes how, in a similar way, women have become "self-policing subjects, self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance" (1997, p.107). Although Misa possesses an 'ideal body', even within the strict standards of the modelling industry she must continue to monitor her diet, consistent with Bartky's suggestion that the modern woman is told she is never 'ideal'.

L's account trivialises Misa's concern about weight, and constructs her as capable of managing her weight through "using her head". As discussed prior, topics and issues regarded traditionally as 'feminine', such as personal appearance, are deemed unintelligent, implicit in L's comment, that he is too intelligent and busy to worry about weight gain. Misa's character is positioned as unintelligent yet beautiful, the 'dumb blonde' within beauty discourse, whose good looks, and lack of intelligence are constantly referred to. The 'dumb blonde' subjectivity has been described by Greenwood and Ishbell (2002) as embodying both the sex appeal of an adult woman, and the unknowing innocence of a child. More broadly, the pairing of beauty and unintelligence is a common occurrence in portrayals of female characters in Western media, from 'reality television' (e.g. *Beauty and the Geek*, 2005), to fictional media (e.g. *Legally Blonde*, 2001). Glick and Fiske (1996) suggest that the 'dumb blonde' subjectivity works to remove the intimidation a beautiful woman holds for men through the use of 'humour', while its effect is to subordinate women. Consistent with their view, in *Death Note*, Misa is always depicted as a 'dumb blonde' within the context of humour. The inclusion of the 'dumb blonde' subjectivity in *Death Note* accords with the inequitable position of women and acceptance of misogyny in Japanese society. Notably, past studies have shown a correlation between the enjoyment of sexist 'humour' and the endorsement of rape myths (Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998) and traditional notions of gender (Moore, Griffiths & Payne, 1987). A further possible reading of L's comment is its literal meaning- that the energy consumed by using brain power will help you maintain your weight. This meaning could suggest a relationship between having a low weight (which is seen as ideal within dominant discourses of beauty) and intelligence, and vice versa. However, this meaning would contradict the 'dumb blonde' subjectivity. As L carelessly eats sweets and remains thin, his comment positions himself as knowledgeable and smart through contrasting himself to Misa's projected lack of 'using her head'.

The Working Woman

As previously described, Misa's 'dumb blonde' subjectivity has negative repercussions on how she is perceived and treated. However, her conformity to the ideal body within beauty discourse grants her success in her 'feminine' job as a model. Her highly feminised subjectivity is further emphasised in a character profile at the start of the manga where she is introduced as possessing a high level of charm, social life, and willingness to act, but lacking in intelligence, creativity and motivation. As a popular model, her charismatic characteristics may be read as making sense in a 'feminine' industry where sociability and beauty is seen to trump 'brains', therefore rendering her lack of intelligence as unimportant. Constructions of Misa as socially pleasing within traditional femininity are evident during her interview for a modelling job, where she describes her perceived positive qualities as "healthy, happy and cheerful". Misa also infantilizes herself in the interview referring to herself as "girl", and using adjectives to describe herself which are commonly used to describe young children. However, within a Japanese culture that perceives 'cuteness' in women positively, Misa may be seen to use self-infantilization to her advantage. By way of contrast, a man's use of words such as "healthy, happy and cheerful" to describe himself in a job interview would construct him as unsuccessful, and counter to the competitiveness, dominance and aggression that construct 'successful' masculinity (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). For Misa, positioning herself as "healthy, happy and cheerful" is consistent with what is deemed appropriate femininity in Japanese culture, and ultimately gets her the job.

As a successful model, Misa is depicted as understanding her industry's requirement of her to not only maintain her heterosexually attractive body but also to further present it in sexually provocative ways. In a scene where she introduces herself to a company she will model for, she refers to their possible expectation for her to display her body in nude photography.

Misa: “I am Misa Misa! Although I don’t do nude photos, I’m willing to do swimsuit photos and lingerie shots! Please be kind to me!”

Misa’s outfit for the job interview differs from her usual gothic Lolita dress- her outfit is sexually provocative with a heart shape cut out between her breasts, and is cropped, exposing her navel while her skirt is very short. Her outfit appears to have the desired effect (i.e. persuade the company to employ her), as the businessmen respond to her appearance “Oh, she’s genuine and really cute...” In this scene, Misa does not say much, apart from briefly introducing herself, then specifying that she is not willing to shoot nude photographs, but is “willing to do swimsuit and lingerie shots”. Misa’s need to specify what sort of photographs she is willing to do implies her awareness of an expectation in the fashion and entertainment industry for women to participate in body exposing photo shoots, or at least a willingness to compromise with wearing lingerie and swimsuits, in order to be hired or successful. Within postfeminist discourses of liberation, the display of the body is normalized and regarded as ‘empowering’, through the notions of both sexuality and choice; women may choose to present their bodies in a ‘sexy’ way, and derive pleasure from choosing to do so (Gill, 2007). Arguably, however, where women are presented as ‘sexy’ within the context of media such as lingerie advertising, it is detrimental to efforts towards gender equality, rather than empowering (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Amy-Chinn claims that despite such depictions of women being presented under a guise of postfeminist choice and empowerment, women’s bodies continue to be positioned as objects of a heterosexual gaze, adversely recuperating sexist portrayals of women. Within the context of Misa’s quote, the notions of ‘power’ and ‘choice’ are challenged, as her need to compromise with lingerie and swimsuit photos illustrate an interpersonal pressure placed on her to present herself as sexy; the ‘norm’ and expectation of being sexy restricts her ability to outright refuse it.

The women in the *Death Note* universe do not seem to have any place within leadership roles or more heroic ‘masculine’ jobs. This reflects the gendering of the Japanese labour force as organized around essentialist constructions of gendered femininity and masculinity. Where scenes are depicted of police or in the business meetings of a large company, no women appear to be present, reflective of the gendered hierarchy in the Japanese labour force (Ogi, 2003). For example, in one shot of the police station, there are at least 26 male officers present, and no women. In this instance, policing is associated with constructions of masculinity such as being strong and brave. These constructions of masculinity are evident, for example, in a family dinner scene at Light’s house. Light’s father, the police sergeant Mr Yagami, describes his case over dinner. Light’s mother and sister visually show concern for the dangerous ‘Kira Case’ he is working on, but do not comment further on the case. Light and his father discuss the case in more detail.

Mr Yagami: “No, I’ll never give up. I will not back away from crime”

Sayu: “Dad...”

Mother: “Dear...”

Light: “... Admirable, dad. I support you. If anything happens to you...I will personally put an end to Kira”.

Sayu: “Brother...”

Mother: “Light...”

As a police sergeant, Mr Yagami asserts bravery through boldly announcing that he will continue to work on bringing the murderer ‘Kira’ to justice, despite the dangerous and difficult circumstances of his case. Light’s response to his father’s announcement also draws on a traditional masculine discourse of bravery, but also to position himself as vengeful and violent. Through their insertion in traditional masculinity discourses, the two male characters

position themselves as brave heroes, capable of working under dangerous conditions and exerting active responses to the situation. In contrast, the female characters' responses do not suggest any action, positioning them as passive bystanders. Further, their facial expressions project anxiety, as they are drawn with raised expressive eyebrows and a bead of sweat is visible on the mother. In contrast, the male characters are drawn with confident or calm expressions, denoted by Light's smiles and the explosive background of Mr Yagami's frame which expresses his determination.

Death Note also draws on discourses of traditional femininity in its portrayal of domesticity as expected in a 'good woman'. Matanle et al. (2004) suggests that Japanese society places an expectation on women to abandon their careers in order to marry and become full-time 'good' mothers. Traditionally, motherhood is depicted as the ultimate woman's role, where she would ideally sacrifice her other desires and ambitions for childrearing. In *Death Note*, Light's mother is an embodiment of a traditional, domestic 'good mother'. Her occupation as a housewife is her defining characteristic- she is seldom seen doing anything which isn't housework related, and she wears an apron (a signifier of domesticity) in every appearance. As the mother of Light and Sayu, she dotes on her children and offers Light whatever he wants, while other family members expect her to be responsible for all the domestic tasks in the house, with which she happily obliges. Although her life is depicted as dull and restricted within the domicile, she is never shown to dispute her prescribed role. Elsewhere in the text, however, an imposed expectation of domesticity is played out in a scene which takes place in a hotel room shared between Naomi (the ex-FBI agent) and her husband Raye before he was murdered. Although the scene's purpose is to introduce Naomi to the audience as she later investigates her husband's murder, further readings are consistent with not only the strong traditional gender roles evident in Japanese

society, but also the lack of choice in the requirement that women abide by these expectations.

Raye: "But now, you're just my fiancée. You're not an agent anymore".

Naomi: "..."

Raye: "No more Kira case. No more danger. That's what you promised me when I decided to bring you so we could meet your parents in Japan."

Naomi: "Alright, Raye. Force of habit... I'm sorry"

Raye: "It's ok, don't worry about it. Once we start a family, you'll be so busy you won't even remember that you were once an agent, and there won't be any time for your old habits."

As an ex-FBI agent, Naomi begins to take interest in her fiancée's 'Kira case'.

However, Raye scolds her interest, reminding her that she is no longer an agent and is now "just his fiancée". The word "just" can be read as having a regulatory function, belittling her through limiting and devaluing her capacities to being a fiancée. Consistent with the dominant nurturing discourses of femininity within Japanese society, Raye's expectation that she reject her position as an independent career woman is normalized, as Naomi is constructed as sacrificing career for a domestic life (Cooke, 2001). Naomi continues to carry her passion for her old career, as shown in her sad facial expressions throughout the conversation, which Raye reduces to her career "old habits", undermining her ambitions outside of her prescribed domestic roles. Understanding the subjectivity of 'wife' within a traditional discourse, Naomi apologises for deviating from it. Within a 'have and hold' discourse (Hollway, 1989), Raye is constructed as a powerful object of desire that has control over the commitment and love which Naomi desires, whereas Naomi is reduced from her position as a once powerful FBI agent, to a position of subservience and subordination. However, a discourse of traditional masculinity would construct Raye as a concerned and

responsible husband, again, trying to protect his wife from the dangerous job she so desires. Although in contrast to Misa, Naomi is not visually depicted as a child, she is similarly infantilized by her fiancée's assertion of control in not allowing her to make her own important life decisions and positioning himself as her 'protector'. Throughout their interaction, Naomi's responses are minimal in contrast to Raye, only passively agreeing in response to him, although her facial expressions project her sadness. Further, their interaction could be read as constructed within a racial discourse. Raye, a white American man, is constructed as more powerful within the relationship, evident through the normalized construction of the demands he exerts towards his wife, while Naomi, a Japanese woman, is constructed as passive and obedient to Raye. This is consistent with constructions of Japanese women within general Western stereotypes as passive and obedient (Darling-Wolf, 2004).

The Good Girlfriend

Before Light and Misa had met, Light as 'Kira', had managed to 'bring justice' to the murder of Misa's parents, through using the powers of his Death Note to punish their murderer. Grateful to Light, Misa finds Light, and falls in 'love at first sight' with him. Their initial love story positions the male character as a 'prince', who rescues the distressed 'princess' within a romantic narrative (Jackson, 2001). This is consistent with regular constructions of the male character within romantic narration as the solution to the female character's problems (Walkerdine, 1990). However, Light is uninterested in pursuing a romantic relationship with her, even aggressively threatening her "If you don't listen to me, I may kill you". Misa is unresponsive to his aggression, and continues to profess her love to him. Her ignorance towards his aggression could be read as her positioning within romantic narratives, which often position women as 'changing' the aggressive male character through love (Jackson, 1993a). 'Rescued' by her prince, Misa pursues romance through consistently

suggesting dating and even marriage to Light. However, a disinterested Light continues to use Misa as a tool for his murders.

Throughout the manga, Misa continues to be depicted as being more invested than Light in their romantic relationship. For example, she significantly sacrifices half of her lifespan in a deal with a death god, in order to attain supernatural powers to help Light despite her knowing that her love for him was unreciprocated.

Light: “To meet me... to become my power, you sacrificed half of your life to get the eyes... you will be a powerful weapon”

Although the sacrifice itself does not play a major part in the storyline, her supportive role against Light’s enemies becomes her main purpose within the storyline. Traditional discourses of femininity position women in heterosexual relationships as being expected to make sacrifices for their male partners (Cooke, 2001), such as sacrificing their careers for their husbands (as Naomi was required to do). The implication within sacrifice is to put the needs of another before the self, placing a higher value on another person. Within a romantic discourse, Misa’s sacrifice of half her lifespan may be read as the ultimate act of love, yet it is unappreciated by Light. Misa, who positions herself as a good girlfriend within a romantic discourse, is instead positioned by Light as a “powerful weapon”. Although the position of ‘girlfriend’ connotes equality within a relationship, a ‘weapon’ positions Light as a user, while disempowering Misa as the tool in his hands. Misa’s willingness to obey Light is depicted as being due to her placing a high value on attaining and maintaining ‘love’, shown through repeated scenarios of her being rewarded by Light with “I love you”, whenever she successfully follows his orders. As discussed prior, love is depicted in the majority of manga targeted at a female audience as ‘conquering all obstacles’, and as the means to happiness (Toku, 2007). In *Death Note*, a manga primarily targeted at a male audience, love is

constructed as what women view as happiness, and what the female characters obsessively prioritise in life.

The normalization of passivity and cooperation (Cejka & Eagly, 1999) as a requirement of femininity always positions women as subordinate to men. In *Death Note*, Misa has been positioned as such. For example, one scene visually illustrates the power balance between Misa and Light. Misa kneels in front of Light, on the floor with her face buried into his shoulder. Goffman's (1976) analysis of gender constructions in advertising suggested that the presentation of the lowering of women's bodies relative to men's, as the scene described, shows appeasement and passive acceptance of the male gaze. The sexualised presentation of Misa's body (e.g. her skirt is pulled up, exposing her underwear) may arguably be read as similarly constructed for the male audience's gaze. Drawing again on Goffman's work, she is constructed as passive through her facing away from the reader, whereas Light, in contrast, exerts dominance by looking straight at the reader. Additionally, his posture sitting in front of Misa and on the bed, his legs spread connoting a relaxed stance and his gaze directed down on her, also suggests confidence and dominance. These non-verbal cues to Light's position of power later materialize in his emotionally violent behaviour towards Misa.

Although the definition of emotional violence is fluid, it can include control, intimidation, manipulation, and infantilizing (Montminy, 2005). Such behaviours are evident in Light's treatment of Misa, which she responds to with fear and uncertainty. For example, in a scene which illustrates how stressed Light is becoming as the police draw closer to uncovering the identity of 'Kira', he snaps at Misa.

Misa: "Li-Light? Are you ok? Your face is-"

Light: "Misa, just shut up and do what I told you!"

Misa: “Eh?”

Light: “Carry out judgment in Japan like we always do! It’ll all get messed up if we neglect it- you can understand that much right?...”

Misa: “Al-alright. Uhm, when you say these guys, you mean-?”

Light: “I said to do what I told you!”

Misa, who throughout the manga has been constructed as a childish ‘dumb blonde’ subject, becomes a victim to Light’s aggressive outburst. However, in the current scenario where one might empathise with her and position her as a victim, she is instead positioned as ‘deserving it’. The constant infantilization of her and her role in providing comic relief throughout the manga masks his abuse towards her, as he appears to simply be admonishing her because of her portrayed ineptness “I said to do what I told you!” However, everything he says to her in this excerpt demeans her, as when he refers to her lack of intelligence “you can understand that much right?” Misa does not defend herself against Light, and is instead constructed as powerless against his verbal attacks. Although Light’s treatment of Misa throughout *Death Note* is abusive, it is disturbingly questionable as to whether a Japanese audience would identify his behaviour as such. Globally, psychological violence is under recognized, and so within the context of Japan, which continues to lag behind other developed countries in legally addressing all forms of domestic violence (Yoshihama & Sorenson, 1994), Misa’s victimisation could be interpreted by audiences as normal and acceptable. As a shounen manga, such examples of interactions with women, together with the more generalized disempowered construction of women work to normalize abusive practices for audiences.

Chapter Summary

As a manga with a mainly male demographic, the majority of main characters presented in *Death Note* were male, the character Misa being the only regularly recurring female protagonist. As Misa was constructed as being an unintelligent character, the analysis overwhelmingly identified sexist subjectivities which aligned with traditional discourses of femininity. This was especially amplified where Misa was presented alongside male characters who were constructed as geniuses.

The analysis of *Death Note* identified several key subjectivities including ‘the cute woman’, ‘the ero-kawaii woman’, ‘the pretty woman’, ‘the working woman’ and ‘the good girlfriend’. Although such subjectivities may be read through a postfeminist lens as signifying female ‘empowerment’, they were presented in *Death Note* alongside negative connotations of unintelligence and dependence, in turn constructing women as being either infantilized or subordinate to male characters. Further, although there were many workplace scenarios which presented opportunities for working women to be depicted, women were excluded from workplaces which are traditionally associated with masculine qualities.

The following chapter turns to the femininities made available in a second shounen manga, *Gintama*, which is a comedy.

Chapter Four

Constructions of the (Super)heroine- *Gintama*

In contrast to the limited depictions of femininity in *Death Note*, *Gintama* constructs its female characters in a variety of ways. Outwardly, the female characters are constructed as empowered, with one of the main characters being a super-human girl. However, as a comedy, *Gintama* also constructs female characters within derogatory, disempowered subjectivities under a guise of humour. Constructions of female minor characters are particularly reflective of the negative subjectivities discussed in *Death Note*.

The alternate universe of *Gintama* is set during the historical Edo period, in a fusion of historical and modern Japan due to an alien (named Amanto) invasion. Many of the characters are samurai, coexisting alongside real historical figures. However, due to an alien invasion (constructed in ways which suggest Westernization) and the subsequent coexistence between the aliens and humans, modern technology is readily available, while modern pop-culture is made relevant. The protagonists are constructed as the heroes of the manga, helping the other characters through fighting evil and their strong moral guidance. However, despite the inclusion of modern 'Western' influences, the constructions of femininity are overall consistent with Japan's traditional discourses. The plot follows three main protagonists- Gintoki, Shinpachi and Kagura, who form the 'Yorozuya', freelancers who take on any job they are offered. Kagura, the only female of the three, is a teenage alien with superhuman strength. However, she maintains a human appearance. As one of the physically strongest characters of the manga, she is constructed as a powerful character. Several other female characters are constructed as possessing a high physical strength, such as Tsukuyo and Otae both who will be addressed later in this chapter. However, there are conflicting constructions of female characters made available in *Gintama*- although some women are constructed as

powerful and independent, other women are constructed as disempowered, objectified or as helpless ‘damsels in distress’.

The (Super)heroine Woman

Contrary to dominant discourses of gender differences, which posit that men are naturally more aggressive and women are weaker (Pleck, 1976), female characters that are constructed as strong or as superheroines emerged in girl’s manga comics in the 1990s (Gwynne, 2013) alongside the growing postfeminist movement. These characters contrasted the previously dominant constructions of traditional femininity which depicted women as dependent and weak (Grigsby, 1998). These contemporary constructions of femininity were praised by feminist scholars (Fantone, 2003), as superheroines were constructed alongside characteristics which were previously exclusively associated with traditional discourses of masculinity, such as being strong, independent and assertive, which in turn seemingly eliminated such sexist stereotypes. The emergence of superheroines in manga became popularised to a point where they have become termed ‘sento bishojo’, which loosely translates to “beautiful fighting girl” (Kittredge, 2014). However, as Kitteredge points out, the heroines simultaneously are constructed as ideal within feminine beauty discourses, possessing “thin and beautiful bodies”, and conform to the Japanese ‘kawaii’ aesthetic (Kinsella, 1995) as described in *Death Note*. Further, she argues that the superheroine characters of manga and anime targeted at a male audience are constructed following male standards and through a male gaze. The heroines within *Gintama* are positioned as sento bishojo, as they uniformly share slender bodies, large eyes, and long, feminine hair, whilst simultaneously positioned as strong fighters. However, one may also argue that the male protagonists in mainstream manga are similarly drawn with slender bodies and large eyes.

The main heroine Kagura, Shinpachi's older sister Otae, Sarutobi the ninja, Kyuubei the skilled swordswoman, and many other female characters are constructed as possessing physical strengths and abilities which equate to or surpass the strengths of the male characters. Such female characters are constructed as rejecting or diminishing characteristics of femininity as a weakness while possessing exaggerated strength, in contrast to characters who are constructed as embracing traditionally feminine characteristics and in turn are constructed as reliant and subordinate to male characters. Such constructions could possibly be read as an attempt by producers to project their supportive attitudes towards gender equality and to gain a female readership through presenting empowered female characters rather than those who were uniformly male. Kagura possesses superhuman strength due to her 'Yato' race, depicted through scenes of her overpowering male characters with her physical strength. Members of her 'Yato' race are noted to possess outrageous strength and a violent desire to kill. However, after leaving behind her family after her blood-thirsty brother attempted to murder her parents, Kagura is depicted as desiring to use her strength for the greater good. Notably though, she is the only female 'Yato' depicted in the manga. This could be read through dominant discourses of masculinity as being due to the Yato's violent characteristics which are traditionally associated with masculinity.

Further, the projected gender equality through her strength is disputable, as she is constructed as lacking agency, and reliant on a male figure of authority or mentor, such as a father figure, consistent with Kitteredge's (2014) findings on young superheroines in both Western and Japanese media. Although Kagura is suggested to be one of the most physically powerful characters in the manga, she is positioned as subordinate to the title character, Gintoki. Aside from their projected age difference, Kagura is persistently depicted as relying on Gintoki for a home, food, and emotional support, and follows his bidding. Although they are not related, their relationship could be read within a parent-child discourse, with Kagura

positioned as Gintoki's child, and Gintoki as a wise father-figure and mentor to both Kagura and Shinpachi.

To the pattern of contradictory pairings of strength with vulnerability, the superhuman strength which the superheroines possess is constructed as a source of disempowerment. One way in which this can be seen is the positioning of the women within an objectification discourse as expendable tools being used by powerful male characters, as Kitteredge (2014) observes in her findings. In turn, the female characters are constructed as naïve or submissive, willingly using their powers to serve a powerful male figure. For example, although Kagura was initially introduced as being almost invincible and possessing superhuman strength, she is disempowered as a victim of manipulation. She is also ultimately rescued from gangsters who used her and her strength to do their bidding by Gintoki, which positions him as a hero and Kagura as a vulnerable victim. However, she later becomes one of the main characters and one of the strongest characters in the manga. On the other hand, Kagura's empowerment through her superhuman strength is unrealistic and consistent with past criticism for Western heroines which claim such constructions are inapplicable to women who do not possess superhuman strength (Gonick, 2006).

The character Tsukuyo is also consistently constructed as strong and empowered by her strength. Similar to Kagura, Tsukuyo shares a similarly tragic past- Tsukuyo was sold off as a prostitute as a child, and was trapped in the historical red light district of Edo, Yoshiwara. Despite her circumstances, Tsukuyo is constructed as empowered through becoming the leader of the all-female group of assassins 'Blooms of Yoshiwara', who are employed to assassinate prostitutes who attempt to escape or are no longer requested. However, the Blooms secretly protect the women through pretending to assassinate them, then recruiting them to join them. Both the Blooms' and Kagura's storylines are consistent with Kitteredge's (2014) finding that superheroine characters evolve into their subject

positions through a past tragic event, a contrast to the male characters who simply are strong because they are male, which in turn may be read to suggest that women are unable to become stronger through normal circumstances. Although Tsukuyo and her group are constructed as strong and brave, it is implied they were once restricted by their femininities, positioning them as subordinate to men. Tsukuyo describes the empowerment to rebel against male authority and protect other women as gained by losing her perceived position as a woman.

Tsukuyo: “I ended up getting my face scratched up and had to give up the way of the woman, but I didn’t grow resentful, because what I gained instead was the hundred blooms, and the chance to protect the women of Yoshiwara. For the sake of protecting Hinowa.”

As a result of having her “face scratched up”, Tsukuyo perceives that she had to give up the “way of the woman”. Although the meanings offered are ambiguous, a possible reading of Tsukuyo’s line could be her understanding of femininity as entirely dependent on her physical appearance, and so when her face became scarred, she could no longer live “the way of the woman”. The damage to her face had caused her to lose her ‘beauty’ which was suggested to comprise of a gentle, flawless face, and held her perceived value as a woman. In particular, within the context of living and working in Yoshiwara, this scarring had rendered her no longer ‘marketable’ as a prostitute or sexually attractive to men, implying that the “way of the woman” is limited to roles which value physical appearance. The emphasis placed on the importance of a ‘beautiful’ aesthetic is reflective of postfeminist discourses of femininity, which associates the value of women through her appearance (Gill, 2007). However, the permanent scars Tsukuyo obtained, which are a defining characteristic on her face, could be read in several ways. Although in some ways, scars can be perceived as a mark of victimisation, Tsukuyo’s scar, alongside her serious facial expressions and tough demeanour, could be read as constructing her as ‘badass’, a characteristic typically associated

with male action heroes. So it could be argued that in losing her perceived ‘femininity’ she is constructed as having become traditionally ‘masculine’, drawing on binary gender roles. However, she perceives her scars as a gain as she is no longer restricted to the “way of the woman”, and is free to choose a rewarding life of protecting other women in Yoshiwara from male authorities or powerful clients. Within a feminist discourse, Tsukuyo is constructed as a heroine as she wilfully rejects the femininities of traditional discourse, becoming a tough heroine who rescues other women and challenges male authority through ruthless violence, physical skill, and ability to stay unemotional, characteristics praised within discourses of masculinity (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). The rejection of femininity for a masculine identity in order to position oneself as a ‘tough heroine’ character however, suggests a continuing disassociation between heroic or aggressive characteristics and femininity. As Hills (1999) claims, Western action heroines have been described as being ‘pseudo males’ or ‘not really women’, and are unable to position themselves simultaneously as both female and heroic. Although Tsukuyo is positioned as a powerful heroine who has allegedly given up the “way of the woman”, she is displaced from her position as a ‘pseudo male’ in less serious contexts and is instead positioned within standards of normative femininity through her intolerance to alcohol, presentation of her heterosexually attractive body and hinted attraction to Gintoki, which in turn could be read as constructing her as attractive to the male consumer (Brown 2011).

Shinpachi’s older sister Otae is also depicted as immensely strong, albeit only in comical contexts. Although she is initially constructed as a gentle, feminine character, through her appearance (pink kimono, feminine facial characteristics typical of manga) and polite ‘feminine’ behaviour (particularly in contrast to male characters), she regularly exerts her strength and exaggeratedly violent behaviour towards male characters when angered. For instance, she is often depicted as punching male characters so hard that they fly across the

room. However, Otae only utilises her strength under humorous contexts, and is also positioned as a victim. In a scene where she is being threatened by a debt-collecting Amanto, Otae's character is constructed within traditional discourses of femininity as weak and helpless (Pleck, 1976). The Amanto attempts to punch Otae in anger for her inability to pay him back, but is stopped by Gintoki, who blocks the amanto off and reprimands him for trying to punch a woman.

Amanto: "You idiot... did you think I wouldn't do anything you just because you're a woman!?"

[Gintoki stops him from punching Otae]

Gintoki: "Let's stop there, all right? Even if she was raised by gorillas, she's still a girl"

Otae, who otherwise has been constructed as strong and tough, is in this instance reduced to a passive character who does not defend herself against the Amanto, and is instead rescued by Gintoki. Drawing on a traditional femininity discourse that underpins the 'damsel in distress', the protagonist Gintoki's position as a hero is asserted whereas Otae is positioned as the 'damsel' (Stover, 2013). In positioning himself as the hero of the scenario and Otae as the 'damsel in distress', Gintoki becomes empowered as a strong male character who asserts his masculinity, in contrast to Otae who embodies notions of dominant femininity as weak and defenceless in serious situations (Grigsby, 1998). Further, Gintoki describes Otae as "still a girl", although she is a full grown woman with a job. Similarly to the *Death Note* infantilized Misa, Gintoki positioning Otae as 'a girl' could be read as suggesting that Otae is vulnerable and childlike and that in turn, hitting her would be unjust. The way the scenario repeatedly draws attention to her gender as female ("just because you're a woman!?" and "she's still a girl"), and her position as a damsel while disregarding her earlier constructions as a tough woman, re-asserts normative sex differences, in particular that women are the vulnerable, weaker gender in need of protection by men. Although as a manga of the action

genre the audience is presented with many glamourized fight scenes, where the heroes violently defeat enemies in battle, strong superheroines seldom appear in the serious fight scenes, and are more typically positioned as victims or deployed for comical relief.

The Transgendered Woman

Although Japan has a rich history of blurring gender lines in cultural activities such as kabuki (involving male actors dressed as females), and the musical genre ‘visual kei’ (where men often dress in traditionally feminine clothing), contemporary dominant discourses are unaccepting of those which fall outside binary constructions of gender and sexuality (DiStefano, 2008). Such is evident in *Gintama* through the construction of the transgendered character Saigou. Saigou is a recurring character who identifies as a woman while performing on stage and as a mother, but retains ‘masculine’ physical features (facial hair, large muscles). As a character positioned outside hegemonic gender discourses, Saigou is targeted as a victim of ridicule and mockery by Gintoki and other characters, who consistently refer to Saigou and her fellow transgendered characters as “monsters” and as ugly, while her non-feminine characteristics are heavily exaggerated, reinforcing the acceptability of ridiculing those who do not fit into their prescribed gender norms under a guise of humour. Further, *Gintama* constructs the transgender identity as a choice, and that gender is interchangeable depending on the context. For example, when Saigou is depicted as engaging in domestic or feminine behaviour such as working behind a bar or being a parent, she positions herself as a woman. Further, when her son calls her “father” she scolds him for not acknowledging her identity as his mother: “Not father!! I told you to call me mother!!” On the other hand, when he is exerting bravery and protecting his son, he positions himself as a ‘man’.

Gintoki: “You and your dad are both men!! No one can see that? Enough of that bullshit!!

Son: “Mo...mo...mom... I’m sorry!!”

Saigou: “Dumbass! I told you to call me father”.

In this scene where Saigou’s son is being attacked by a beast, Saigou fights the beast off and rescues his son. He temporarily abandons his identity as a woman, stripping off his feminine kimono to reveal a wrestler’s outfit. His interchangeable gender across different contexts could be read as constructing the transgender identity as a choice, and therefore unnatural. A further possible reading of Saigou’s abandonment of femininity in this context is similar to that of Tsukuyo’s abandonment of femininity, where those who position themselves as women are unable to possess traditionally masculine characteristics such as bravery, strength and heroism. This notion is consistent with Western heroines who are regularly described as ‘not really a woman’, as the possession of heroic and brave characteristics are read as a rejection of femininity (Hills, 1999). Further, the protagonist Gintoki is unaccepting of Saigou’s identity as a transgendered woman, and consistently exclaims that Saigou is a man, proven by the fact that he is exerting heroic behaviour- a notion supported by Saigou when he denies his identity as a female character, and positions himself as a male.

The Pretty Woman

As discussed in the previous chapter, postfeminism presents the body as central to the meanings of femininity, and consistently depicts homogeneous portrayals of an ideal body (Gauntlett, 2008). Gill (2007) cites postfeminism as a source of encouragement for self-surveillance and representations of ‘ideal’ femininity, while problematizing bodies which do not fit the ideal. She further claims that the possession of a ‘hot’ body is portrayed as important, and suggests that women are constantly under pressure to monitor and remodel their bodies and selves in order to conform to a ‘hot’, sexy standard. Similar to Misa of *Death Note*, and consistent with mainstream postfeminism, the majority of female characters in

Gintama are constructed as attractive, young, and thin. However, female characters associated with negative characteristics (e.g. unintelligent, spoilt, and evil) are frequently constructed with exaggerated physical features projected as ‘unattractive’, which are repeatedly stigmatised through jokes made by the protagonists. This is consistent with mainstream postfeminism which scrutinizes female bodies which do not conform to the slim, sexy ideal. In *Gintama*, the character Kimiko is constructed as a spoilt, shallow party-girl, with an unattractive appearance, and is subjected to Gintoki and Shinpachi’s cruel jokes about her appearance, particularly her weight, and their disbelief in her capability to have a romantic relationship. In this example, she approaches the protagonists for their help, and is subject to ridicule over her appearance.

Shinpachi: “It’s her, the drugged girl from the time we fought with Harusame [gang].”

Gintoki: “Ah yes, yes, that ham!!!”

Kimiko: “You’ve just changed it from a pig to a ham!”

...

Shinpachi: “We’re sorry, well, how was it after that, Hamiko san?”

Kimiko: “Although it seems like you just follow what goes on, I’m not Hamiko, I’m Kimiko”

...

Kimiko: “It’s hard to recover, even now, I’m being checked regularly in the hospital... I already appear to be underweight”

Gintoki: “What appears to be underweight? Your heart?”

...

Kimiko: “But this time, the business with the boyfriend has gone bad”

Shinpachi: “Boyfriend? Hamiko-san, are you still having illusions?!”

Kimiko: “Is it that fun for you to hurt people?”

Kimiko had been introduced negatively as an unintelligent and spoilt daughter of a rich man, while her storylines depicted her involvement with gangs and drugs. She is simultaneously constructed as aesthetically unattractive through her deviation from the uniform, idealised manga character appearance (Grigsby 1998) - she is overweight, has small, thin eyes, and a wide nose. However, it is implied that she has attempted to conform to the postfeminist standards of beauty, as she is presented with styled, dyed blonde hair, a tan, and wears lipstick, which in turn could be read as a further reason for ridicule as postfeminism presents an expectation for women to possess beauty skills (Gill, 2007), and she is constructed as having 'failed' after trying. Further, her right to 'beautify' herself is removed and taunted, consistent with Lazar's (2011) argument that postfeminist discourses of beauty posit that only those who fit the physical beauty ideals are granted the freedom to wear what they want. Those who do not conform to the ideal are marginalized, and society deems it unacceptable for them to enjoy the 'freedom' and 'empowerment' of beauty practices.

In the above segment, Kimiko has approached the protagonists to help her and her boyfriend evade angry gang members after abandoning their life of crime. However, the segment is presented as comedic, as the protagonists, constructed by the manga as heroes, ridicule her through calling her a 'ham' and 'Hamiko' numerous times, referring to her size. Further, their 'joke' may be read as positioning her as no longer a human and likening her to a pig, simply due to her appearance. As the protagonists of *Gintama*, who are overwhelmingly constructed as the heroes, they legitimise such comments as humorous, rather than as bullying. Such an attitude towards those who do not fit in the idealised norm is consistent with Japan's collectivist attitude towards those who are different, wherein those who do not identify within the idealised 'norm' are constructed as acceptable targets for ridicule. Further, Ford, Boxer, Armstrong et al (2008) claim that the discrimination against

women under the guise of ‘comedy’ is reflective of attitudes towards women which are otherwise not tolerated outside the ‘comedy’ context.

In the extract above, Shinpachi also suggests that it is impossible for Kimiko to attract a man due to her appearance. His attitude is consistent with dominant beauty discourses, which dictate that the possession of an attractive aesthetic is a requirement to attract a man. This tolerance for bullying women based on their appearance places restrictions on women, and regulates them to conform to the prescribed beauty standards in order to avoid the negative feedback from others. Similar to Western countries, Japanese postfeminist culture places a heavy emphasis on self-surveillance (Gill, 2007), encouraging women to purchase goods and invest time into learning how to conform aesthetically to a prescribed beauty standard. As with Kimiko, women are surrounded by messages to lose weight and appear a certain way, through both aggressive advertising and an acceptance to ridicule ‘failures’ of (post)femininity. However, in the *Gintama* segment discussed here, a particular emphasis is placed on the surveillance of weight, given that Kimiko in contrast, appears to conform to other aspects of beauty surveillance such as fake tan and cosmetics.

The Objectified Woman

Gintama often depicts the male characters as openly admiring the bodies of women who are constructed as heterosexually attractive, and commenting on the sexual attractiveness of the bodies. In the next extract, Shinpachi and Gintoki are visiting a hospital and comment on their perceived increase in attraction to women when she wears a nurse outfit.

Shinpachi: “Gin-san... I think nurses are the best.”

Gintoki: “Yeah. For example, if a girl’s only a 7, after she puts on a nurse outfit, she’s instantly a full 10”.

Alongside other traditionally female occupations such as air-hostesses, nurses are fetishized in Japan and overseas (O'Donnell, 1999). Although changing in recent times to accommodate for the increase in male nurses, nurse outfits stereotypically consist of a tailored-to-fit short white dress, and appear as such in manga such as *Gintama*. The ways in which Shinpachi and Gintoki rate the women based on their appearance positions them as objects of the male gaze. The objectification takes place through the removal of the woman's personalities and other non-physical characteristics by the males while they view her as being 'to be looked at', and places a numbered value on her dependant on her appearance. The male 'heroes' ranking of women works to legitimize the scrutiny of female bodies for a male audience, which constructs women as passive objects 'to-be-looked-at' (Mulvey, 1989). Mulvey argues that, traditionally a woman's role in the media was to be on display to the "male gaze", constructed to appear visually-inviting and erotic. Further, the male protagonists accentuating scrutiny may be understood as the surveillance of women, consistent with the normalization of postfeminist discourses of femininity (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006), which in a Japanese collectivist society, adds further pressure on women to fit the idealised body. However, one may argue that postfeminist ideologies promoting surrounding self-surveillance and the continual perfecting of bodies claim to work in favour of women themselves, coexisting alongside ideas of choice and freedom, rather than to please the male gaze.

As a manga set during the Edo period, the femininities presented in *Gintama* are largely consistent with traditional discourses that position women as subordinate to males or as property under male ownership. Feminist ideology appears to be almost non-existent (although as a running joke, one antagonist jokingly refers to himself continuously as a feminist), made particularly clear in scenes where women are depicted as being sold off as prostitutes and kept in cages until they become older and rendered worthless. In the red light

district Yoshiwara, women are continuously positioned as sexual objects, traded and sold by the antagonists before the protagonists arrived to liberate them. In a scene where Tsukuyo describes the ways women were treated in Yoshiwara, she illustrates the objectification of women:

Tsukuyo: “They began to kill off the women there, and trade others as slaves for their amusement. They began an abuse that would spread to the whole underground. A place where people could only become objects, or die. A place where no one could escape.

Contemporary Western feminist literature generally refers to ‘objectification’ as the sexual constructions of women in media as an instrument of sexual pleasure (Gill, 2003). However, the prostitutes of Yoshiwara are constructed within traditional discourses of objectification not only as sexual objects but literally as commodities to be traded and sold. Tsukuyo describes the ways in which they are treated in inhumane ways by powerful men, and how they “become objects”. The women are killed in Yoshiwara once they are no longer desirable to their male clientele or become pregnant. The systematic murder of women once they are unable to work as sex workers not only positions women exclusively as providers of sex but also as useless once they are unable to do so.

Postfeminism seldom address sex trafficking or forced sexual labour, at least in the Western world. Rather, such problems are deemed to be historical (McRobbie, 2004), and women within the sex industry are viewed as being there by choice (Gill, 2007). However, issues such as human trafficking exist in Japan (Jones et al., 2011), although often ignored by society. Within the *Gintama* storyline, the women are constructed as helpless victims of sexual slavery, but seldom constructed as eroticized or ‘to be looked at’ (Mulvey, 1989) by the audience’s gaze. It is arguable that the writers of *Gintama* wanted to accurately present the historical treatment of women during the Edo period, and had felt that not including the ill treatment of women may have been inaccurate. However, due to the fictional fantasy context

in which *Gintama* is based (with aliens, futuristic objects and other fantasy elements), the inclusion of historical sexism may be read as unnecessary and inappropriate considering that *Gintama* is a comedic genre. The protagonists are constructed as perceiving such treatment of women as wrong, and are depicted as rescuing the women from the non-consensual sex industry. The construction of a weak female victim subjectivity also allows the male protagonists (in this case, Gintoki) to take a powerful position as a hero in relation to her female position.

The women forced into prostitution in Yoshiwara are not the only female characters who are confronted with forced sex work. Shimpachi's older sister Otae, who was previously described as a strong female character, feared by many of the male characters, is constructed as a helpless victim in a scene where she is sexually objectified. In a dialogue continuing from the scene described in '(super)heroine women' where an Amanto angrily demands his debt be repaid, the Amanto pressures Otae to work off her debt in his brothel.

Amanto: But you, woman... I'm gonna make you work off your debt. This. I started a new business recently. No underwear Shabu shabu [a type of Japanese cuisine] heaven."

Shimpachi: "No underwear??"

Amanto: "In simpler words, it's flying adult entertainment... I've been collecting cute girls from many planets. If you come along, everyone would be delighted. What I'm saying is you either sell this dojo [Shimpachi and Otae's home, and father's martial arts training gym] or you sell your body. So which will it be?"

The Amanto forces Otae into sex work as an alternative to selling their home. He describes his brothel to Shimpachi and Otae as "No underwear shabu shabu heaven". The Amanto, who is already in a position of power as an employer (or owner) of the women, objectifies and disempowers them through his language. The Amanto begins to brag about "collecting cute girls from many planets", objectifying his employees many times throughout

his brief description. When referring to the women, he uses the word “collect”, a word used for gathering inanimate objects, positioning them as a commodity within a discourse of trade, while he is the collector and owner. Further, he describes his collection as coming from “many planets”, which could be read as sexually objectifying the women through exoticising them. The exoticising of women echoes the exoticising objectification of women in the real world (Matthews, 2002), which is the act of heavily associating stereotypes and ideas to women based on their ethnicity, and adding or removing a perceived ‘value’ to a woman’s attractiveness based on her ethnicity. Further, this positions women of different races as ‘other’, while removing their individuality in order to restrict her to her stereotype.

He further objectifies the female body through telling Otae to “sell your body”, which similarly positions her body as a commodity which could be sold or traded, while suggesting that her body is of a similar value to a building. Similar to the ways male characters infantilized Misa from *Death Note*, the amanto also refers to his employees as “girls”, rather than women, which Carlson (2010) claims is denying adulthood, therefore disempowering women. Out of desperation to keep their home, Otae obediently accompanies the Amanto to the brothel, where the Amanto demands that Otae eroticize her body for his clients through accentuating the appearance of her breasts and taking off her underwear.

Amanto: “How many times do I have to tell you!? You’re supposed to make a valley with your breasts, stupid-ass!”

Otae: [smiling and grabbing the Amanto’s face] “I’ve never been able to make a valley with my breasts in the 18 years I’ve lived.”

Amanto: “Oh, sorry, you couldn’t do that even if you wanted to. Well, anyways, on to the main event!! Take off your underwear and it’s time for shabu shabu!! What’s the matter?!

Hurry up and take it off! It’s too late to back out now!!”

Otae: “Ah!!”

Amanto: “This is for the sake of your dojo! Bear with it!!”

Otae: [Scream]

In this scene, the Amanto is repetitively asking Otae to accentuate the appearance of her breasts. In continuation from the previous dialogue, the Amanto has positioned himself as the owner of Otae’s body, perceiving himself as having the right to dictate how she presents it, while her body is positioned as a commodity. As the owner of a brothel, he expects her to eroticize her body, and responds angrily when she fails to do so. His reaction reflects his notion that women inherently should know how to present themselves within their perceived positions as sexual objects. However, it is also possible to read his treatment of Otae as consistent with the postfeminist discourses, which postulate and instruct women in knowledge about how to eroticize their bodies, and construct eroticized female bodies as the norm (McRobbie, 2004). Otae responds through grabbing his mouth and smiling, telling him that she is unable to create a cleavage due to her smaller breasts. The construction of her breasts as ‘too small’ is consistent with traditional and postfeminist discourses of feminine beauty, wherein the possession of larger breasts connotes heterosexual attractiveness, while smaller breasts need to be ‘enhanced’ (Bordo, 2004; Gill, 2007). Despite the serious nature of the context, this scene is presented within a comedic context, as it draws on a recurring joke of Otae’s self-consciousness towards her ‘small’ chest. In line with the comedic tone, Otae is depicted as smiling, temporarily removing the serious tone.

However, the comedic tone rapidly turns serious as the Amanto is depicted as physically overpowering and forcing her to remove her clothing, a depiction of sexual assault. In contrast to Otae previously having some power over the situation, she is now depicted as powerless through her anxious facial expression, body language (she is underneath the Amanto who is physically on top of her), and her screaming, testimony to her fear and horror of the situation. Further, the Amanto tells her to “bear with it”, recognising

that she does not want to work in the sex industry. Disturbingly, his suggestion to “bear with it” is reflective of the Japanese value of ‘gaman’ which could be loosely translated as patience and endurance, and has been attributed as a reason why many Japanese women do not report sexual assault (Dussich, 2001). A further possible reading within discourses of traditional femininity suggests ‘good’ women would obediently cooperate, and accept that her opinions and feelings do not matter (Walkerdine, 1990).

Following this scene, Otae is rescued by Gintoki, positioning Gintoki as the male hero, while Otae is reduced, once again, to being a helpless victim who lacks ownership over her own body, despite having being constructed as a strong woman in other scenes. Interestingly, Otae spends the rest of the manga employed as a hostess at ‘Snack Smile’. Snack Smile is a hostess club, a Japanese establishment where women are hired to entertain and socialise with male guests by lighting their cigarettes, pouring their drinks, flirting and singing. Although it can be considered as part of the sex industry, it differs from a strip club as there is no dancing or nudity. Further, host clubs, a male equivalent, also exists for female patrons. In contrast to prostitutes who are constructed negatively within media and society, women who are positioned as hostesses in Japanese media, particularly in fashion magazines for young women, are often constructed as successful and luxurious (Jiratanatiteenun et al., 2012), which in turn could be read as empowerment and independence within a postfeminist discourse. In contrast to being forced to work at the brothel, Otae’s freedom to choose her occupation as a hostess, and choose to flirt with men for a job could be constructed as empowering, as she not only has control over her body, but is also constructed as in a position of power over her patrons, who pay her money to be in her company.

The Object of Desire

As the main protagonist and the majority of recurring characters of *Gintama* are male, many of the female characters are constructed as support characters in relation to protagonists. Although the majority of female characters are positioned as friends to the male characters, there are a few relationships of interest to this analysis, specifically, those in which as women, take on subject positions of the pursuer and pursued within romantic relationships.

As discussed in the prior extracts, several of the female characters such as Tsukuyo and Otae are superficially constructed as strong heroines, but it is their relationships with the male protagonists that come to define their main purpose in the plot. For example, the female ninja Sarutobi is initially introduced as a much respected ninja assassin, doing a job traditionally associated with males, which could accordingly, be read as empowering within a feminist discourse. However, she becomes a comical support character whose storyline revolves around her infatuation with Gintoki and stalking him, reducing her to a romance-obsessed female character. Similar to Misa of *Death Note*, her obsession with Gintoki ultimately gets in the way of her job, and constructs her as a frivolous character. Her rejection of her feminist ‘empowerment’ for the traditionally feminine value ‘romance’ is reflective of the perception that feminism is incompatible with romance (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007) and the woman who sacrifices her own needs to maintain a relationship (Gilligan, 1982). Further, Sarutobi is consistently depicted as fantasizing about marrying Gintoki and becoming a housewife. Converse to a reading of disempowerment, this shift could be read as consistent with a postfeminist discourse, which posits that women now have the ‘freedom’ to ‘reclaim’ their positions in the domicile (Negra, 2009). Further, Sarutobi is constructed as a sexual being, as she is depicted as openly projecting her sexual BDSM fantasies onto other characters for comedic effect. Although her function as comical relief and exaggerated

sexuality could be read as mockery of feminine sexuality, an alternative reading could position Sarutobi within postfeminist discourses as sexually empowered (Gill, 2012). Her open interest in her sexuality is consistent with postfeminist discourses of sexuality, which posit that women are no longer restricted by traditional femininities and are free to pursue and enjoy sex. Further, instead of waiting for a male character to pursue her, Sarutobi is the pursuer of the relationship, consistent with a postfeminist ideology which encourages women to actively pursue romance rather than be pursued (Love & Helmbrecht, 2007).

Nonetheless, other female characters in *Gintama* continue to be positioned as the object of heterosexual desire, pursued by male characters. For example Otae, who was discussed in the previous sections and works as a hostess, becomes positioned as the object of Isao Kondou's (leader of police) desire when he falls in love with her and begins to pursue, then stalk her. The stalking becomes a staple joke in the manga, as he often is depicted hiding under tables or in the ceiling in order to be close to her. Kondou's attitudes towards stalking (he believes he is doing it for love) is consistent with depictions of stalking within the context of Western romantic comedy genres, where the depiction of males stalking females is commonly romanticised and constructed as sweet or desirable (Reidinger, 2013). The stalking is constructed as humorous, although realistically, Kondou's behaviour is harassment, while his justifications for his behaviour could be interpreted as quite dangerous. For example, there are several 'comical' scenes where Kondou persistently harasses Otae to date him, such as in the following segment, where he has climbed up a tree outside her house.

Kondou: "Otae-san! Marry me!! Even if you dump me once, or twice, I won't give up! You see, women are happier to be loved than to love!! That's what my mom used to say!!"

Despite being rejected several times, Kondou persistently follows Otae throughout the manga, declaring his love for her. The construction of Kondou's stalking and persistence in *Gintama* as normal or even romantic is, however, inconsistent with the reality of persistent

attitudes towards stalking romantic interests, as such behaviour is deemed inappropriate and dangerous (Williams & Frieze, 2005). In this scene, Kondou announces to Otae that he “won’t give up” until she returns her love. As a comedy genre, *Gintama* constructs Kondou’s stalking as a comical running joke and due to the nature of the character being a ‘good’ character, the harassment is downplayed and overlooked. His quote “you see, women are happier to be loved than to love!” implies his traditional belief (passed down from his mother) that women do not have a choice in who they should date, they should date whoever falls in love with them. Further, his comment could be read as removing women from having an active role within a romantic relationship, while men are the ones who actively do the ‘loving’. Within a Japanese context, sexual harassment is considered a serious crime, but is often interpreted as unwanted touching and sexual remarks. Kondou’s entitlement to Otae is further demonstrated in a scene where he tries to fight Gintoki (who simply is protecting her) for her.

Kondou: “Hey! White-perm boy! I don’t care if you’re Otae-san’s fiancée!! There’s no way someone like you can love Otae-san more than me!! I challenge you to a duel!! With Otae-san as the prize!”

Kondou’s justification that he is entitled to Otae is that he loves her the most. This in turn reflects his disregard for her feelings towards him. Consistent with his prior comment “women are happier to be loved than to love”, Kondou continues to position himself as the active ‘lover’ within a romantic discourse, while Otae is positioned passively as ‘to be loved’. Such notions accord with the active male, passive female binary of traditional gender discourses. Further, where he decides to fight Gintoki for her, she is objectified as a “prize”, and is not given a say in the matter, constructing his belief that it doesn’t matter what her opinion is, but if he knows he can provide her with love, he is entitled to ‘have’ her. His perception of entitlement towards Otae is constructed as romantic or humorous in *Gintama*,

but is reflective of abusive relationships where male partners feel entitled to the love and bodies of their female partners (Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998). However, his attitudes towards ‘winning’ Otae’s heart through persistence perhaps conforms to the traditional discourses which complement the Edo time period *Gintama* is set in. Thus, in a time period where women were traditionally ‘given’ to their husbands, Otae is objectified as a ‘prize’ by Kondou, whose persistence is constructed as a positive characteristic in him.

Chapter Summary

As mentioned previously, it is important to consider the analysis of *Gintama* in a comedy genre context. Self-described as a satire comedy, it relies on its controversial topics which often draw publicity. Satirical comedy can be defined as drawing humour from irony, sarcasm and ridicule, and is frequently presented in both Japanese and Western media as a form of humour, therefore not to be taken seriously. Specifically concerning the ‘ridicule’ aspect of satirical comedy, titles such as *Gintama* often form their jokes based on the mockery of groups of people, in this case women, and ideas using common stereotypes.

Gintama offers a unique world where the Edo period and modern society clash, apparently rendering a norm of sexism as appropriate or acceptable. The male protagonists are constructed as disagreeing with the extreme examples of sexism, such as forced prostitution. Although the protagonists are constructed as righteous, fighting against enemies depicted as exerting extreme sexist behaviour such as sexual assault, they project an acceptance of less obvious sexism such as binary gender roles, while humouring issues such as sexual harassment.

The following chapter turns to the femininities made available in the shoujo manga genre and the subjectivities it offers to its target young female audience.

Chapter Five

Constructions of Relationships and Dependence in Shoujo Manga-

Absolute Boyfriend and NANA

This chapter analyses the constructions of femininity produced in shoujo manga. Although all manga titles are available to diverse audiences, they are categorised into gendered genres depending on the target demographic (Cherney & London, 2006). The shoujo manga genre has been described as manga written for young women by women (Ogi, 2003), and has been likened to the postfeminist ‘chick lit’ and ‘chick flick’ genres of Western popular culture in this study. The success of the latter genres has been attributed to the ‘that’s me’ phenomenon where the female protagonists are positioned as relatable, (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006), a concept which may be similarly applied to the popularity of shoujo manga amongst Japanese women. As manga appropriates some of the norms of Japanese society (Ogi, 2003), offering a medium for self-expression (Suzuki, 1998) and an escape into a fantasy world (Grigsby, 1998), shoujo manga in particular may provide a way of accessing the norms of contemporary femininity amongst contemporary Japanese women. Of particular interest here is the possibility that shoujo manga may offer alternative constructions of femininity to shounen manga, due to its female authorship and target demographic.

As discussed in the introduction chapter (p.11), earlier research has claimed that genres targeted at a female demographic overwhelmingly feature storylines based around romance, positioning love as the ultimate means to happiness. This was strongly evident in the two shoujo manga analysed in this chapter, *Absolute Boyfriend* and *NANA*, as romantic storylines were central to their plots. Constructions of femininity and themes were very similar across these two titles and they are accordingly analysed together in this chapter. *Absolute Boyfriend* is a romantic fantasy manga which revolves around the high school

student 'Riiko' and her robotic lover 'Night' who she created based on characteristics of her ideal boyfriend. As a romantic shoujo manga, *Absolute Boyfriend* could be read as an escape into a fantasy world where a 'perfect' man exists, and any girl can have him as a boyfriend. The second title analysed, *NANA*, presents the friendship between two girls, both named Nana, who possess contrasting personalities. One of the Nanas is an ambitious punk-rock star, who dreams of leading her band to succeed, while the other Nana, who is later nicknamed 'Hachi' (as she will be referred to within this study), is uncertain of what she wants to do with her life and spends her time chasing men. As a 'slice-of-life' manga, *NANA* could be read as a reproduction of the struggles faced by contemporary young Japanese women.

Analysis of the two titles identified several key subjectivities within the manga, including 'the independent woman', 'damsel in distress', 'the sexual gatekeeper', 'pretty woman' and the 'domestic woman'. The subjectivities were constructed within discourses of postfeminism, traditional femininity and romance. The remainder of the chapter explores the ways in which each of the subjectivities are constructed within each title.

The Independent Woman

Postfeminist discourses have popularised the notion of 'empowerment' as being granted through education, career, being single, and possessing 'nice clothes' (McRobbie, 2007). In Japanese society, a shift in attitudes towards single women and independence has been evident through the increase in the average age that both Japanese men and women marry, and the decreasing overall rate of marriage since the 1970s, a change which has been attributed to a range of factors, including educational gains by women, an increase in working women and changes in attitudes towards marriage (Retherford et al., 1996).

NANA engages with this cultural shift through its construction of the ‘independent woman’ through the character Nana, the glamorous rock star who terminated her serious relationship with her boyfriend Ren rather than move with him to Tokyo (to pursue his own musical career), and forfeit her own band’s success. However, consistent with the contradictory notions of postfeminist discourse, her position as an ‘independent woman’ is called into question through the depiction of her quietly struggling with the loss of her relationship which reinforces the emotional costs of her agency (Kim, 2001). Her unhappiness in losing Ren becomes central to her storyline, reconstructing the positive connotations of ‘independent woman’ in negative terms as the cause of her unhappiness. The idea that her decision ultimately became the ‘wrong decision’ is highlighted by the comment of her friend Nobu, who states: “She could’ve followed Ren to Tokyo when he left. Instead of choosing to find happiness as a woman, she chose to protect her pride.” In positioning Nana’s decision as the ‘wrong decision’, Nobu’s comment implies that the ‘right decision’ would have been to follow Ren to Tokyo, and sacrifice her own career for his. Further, his comment implies that “happiness as a woman” would be for Nana to maintain her relationship with Ren, rather than seek career-related success on her own. Kim (2001) claims that the contemporary construction of the ‘independent woman’ as unhappy is rooted in a backlash towards feminism, suggesting that women have become ‘too liberated’. Further, postfeminist narrations of romance regularly construct storylines where independence is problematic, and women are ‘rescued’ from it by their male hero (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006).

Storylines which feature single women wanting to find a heterosexual partner are a staple within postfeminist discourse. For example, the popular television show *Sex and the City*, a series regularly cited in literature as a prime example of postfeminist media (Arthurs, 2003), is marketed through its blurb: “*Sex and the City* charts the lives and loves of four women and their quest to find the one thing that eludes them all- a real, satisfying and lasting

relationship.” (Arthurs, 2003). Consistent with postfeminist discourse, Nana is constructed as an ‘independent woman’ who desires a heterosexual relationship: “But I am still a girl, after all. I still wish to wear nice clothes. And I do yearn for a nice guy.” Although as a punk rock star Nana is overall constructed outside of traditional feminine discourses and positioned as an independent woman who prioritises her ambitions over a relationship, she is also constructed as unable to escape the heterosexual desires of femininity and the inevitability of romance.

The normalisation for women to position themselves within a heterosexual romantic relationship aligns with dominant romantic discourses (Jackson, 1993a). Furthermore, postfeminist discourse likens finding and maintaining a heterosexual relationship to a goal, and constructs contemporary women as the active pursuers of relationships, encouraged to actively work to find the ‘right man’ (Gill, 2009). Hachi from *NANA* positions herself within postfeminist discourses in this way as a contemporary single woman who puts in a great deal of time and effort to finding a boyfriend. The following extract is taken from her monologue after her boyfriend terminated their relationship.

“I had my first meeting when I was disappointed that I couldn’t get into the school of my choice. Then I fell in love at first sight with the art teacher, Okamoto-sensei (25). Even though I wasn’t exactly good at art, I decided to join the art club with my good friend Jun-chan, who’s in the same class as me. Thanks to that, I started to like art a lot. There was no advancement in our relationship, and a year later, he left for another high school... My second meeting came soon after. His name was Nakamura-san (about 23). He worked in a video rental store that opened in my neighbourhood. In order to see him, I made trips to that video store every day. Thanks to that, I ended up liking movies. One day, I decided to voice my feelings, but I was dealt a cold blow... After that, the next target I met was... the chef, Kawasaki-san, who worked at a kitchen I had a part time job at. Why is it I always end up empty handed? Fresh-looking Yoshida (about 20), pizza boy...”

Discourses of romance uniformly construct notions of love and romance as magical and mysterious (Jackson, 1993b). Hachi draws on these discourses of romance which dominate much of the media exposed to women from childhood when she describes her past romantic pursuits. Specifically, she does this through describing her experience as ‘falling in love at first sight’, a phrase commonly reiterated within romantic narratives to construct love as overwhelming, sudden and uncontrollable. However, in contrast to traditional romantic narratives where the woman is pursued by the man (Stover, 2013), Hachi refers to the men she pursues as her “next target”, which positions them as passive objects while she is an active pursuer. Her position as the active pursuer in relation to the male as a passive object ‘to be pursued’ aligns with Gill’s (2009) findings of the ‘contemporary woman’ in postfeminist media. Further, Gill claims that postfeminist discourse constructs contemporary dating as a ‘numbers game’, and that women are instructed to ‘work through’ men in order to eventually find ‘the one’. Hachi’s adherence to the ‘number’s game’ (Gill, 2009) in listing the men she has pursued borders on farce. However, her narration points to the ample amount of effort and time she invested in finding the ‘right man’, and could be read as further conformity with the postfeminist pressure to pursue a relationship. In the previous extract, Hachi’s persistence is specifically highlighted in her pursuit of Nakamura-san at the video store, which involved daily visits to the store to hire movies.

Hachi’s monologue is noticeably absent of feelings or any sense of time between each pursuit, and she appears to recover from each rejection quickly and move on to the next. This reproduction of the ‘chase’ is consistent with Gill’s (2009) findings that postfeminist media excludes notions of negative emotions when describing women in pursuit of relationships, instead constructing it as a systematic, affectless process where women ‘go through’ men until she meets ‘the one’. Hachi’s fast paced ‘manhunt’ not only implies her desperation to be in a relationship, but also a lack of emotional investment with each man and could be read as

reflecting the idea that to be in a relationship is the main goal, no matter who the partner is. Hachi describes her status as ‘empty handed’ when she is rejected, which positions the men as commodities that are quickly gained or lost. The men Hachi pursues are, however, all depicted as disinterested in her approaches, and keen to only address the business they have with her (schoolwork or business). This gendered contrast in interest echoes the male disinterest in romance portrayed in *Death Note*, where women were seen to prioritise relationships over other issues whereas men prioritised business or ‘serious’ topics. This is also consistent with Gill’s (2009) findings that postfeminist discourse construct women as not only likening finding ‘the one’ to work, but sometimes constructing it as prioritised *over* work. Further, although Hachi has demonstrated agency in the pursuit of the men, ultimately it is the men that are constructed as having more agency as they reject her.

Consistent with the dominant stigma of being single in Western postfeminist media, women in the manga analysed here are also constructed as wanting to be in a relationship, desiring marriage, and viewing romantic relationships and marriage as the means towards living ‘happily ever after’ (Jackson, 2001). This was evident in *Absolute Boyfriend*, in a scene where the protagonist Riiko has just been rejected and she projects her anxiety about her lack of romantic relationship in the following monologue:

Riiko: “What the hell? What is this? Everyone looks all super happy. I wanna walk hand in hand with my boyfriend like that!! And then what? Does that mean I can never get married? At this rate, I’ll just age without ever knowing about this or that! Why do I always get rejected like this... does this mean that I’ll never get a boyfriend my entire life!? In the end, I’ll be alone in my apartment and die a dog’s death...”

In this scene, Riiko, who has never been involved in a romantic relationship before, walks down the street and observes the romantic couples around her. Her monologue constructs marriage as a means to happiness and a symbol of a successful life, while a life

without a relationship represents failure, unhappiness and wretchedness. Further, she is drawn in the manga frame with a spotlight on her while couples around her fade into dark surroundings, a framing that connotes her perceived loneliness and ‘otherness’ to everybody else, who is perceived to be happily involved in a relationship. Her depiction of herself as standing out from the ‘norm’ positions her as ‘other’, which has negative connotations within a postfeminist discourse which reinforces norms of heterosexual desirability, which is contrary to its encouragement towards ‘individualism’. Her observation of a couple walking and holding hands, and her subsequent envious reaction “I wanna walk hand in hand with my boyfriend like that!!” may be read as reiterating the notion that she desires to be in a romantic relationship, no matter who her boyfriend is. Her reference to aging without finding a boyfriend (“I’ll just age without ever knowing about this or that!”), may be read as projecting the pressure to find a boyfriend in haste, drawing on the dominant, ageist notions of romantic discourses which reserves romance for the young (Sandfield & Percy, 2003), and constructs older, single women as lonely and isolated. She ends up wondering whether her single status is permanent, and if she would subsequently “die a dog’s death”, drawing on traditional discourses of romance which posit that women who remain unmarried have “failed to be chosen by a fairytale handsome prince” (Lewis & Moon, as cited in Sandfield & Percy, 2003, p. 477). This may also be read as stemming from the negative constructions of being single (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006) and regular depictions of single women as fearful of ‘dying alone’ and unloved (Negra, 2004) within postfeminist media.

The Damsel in Distress

The subjectivity ‘Damsel in Distress’ was a marked presence in the shoujo manga, a subject position characterised by its consistency with traditional discourses of femininity, constructing women as helpless and in need of the help or ‘rescuing’ from a male hero. This

section will discuss the ways in which the ‘damsel’ position has been constructed in shoujo manga.

Postfeminist media has been described as a resource for audiences to explore notions of idealized romance and femininity (Jackson, 2001). Although traditional narratives of romance have been criticized by feminists for consistently constructing heroines as passive and submissive (Bradford, 2012), Wilde (2014) claims that contemporary Western romantic narratives produce femininities which have begun to reject traditional gender binaries. However, despite an abundance in availability and popularity of Western postfeminist media in Japan, the Japanese manga analysed in this study produced stories which overall mobilise a traditional romantic narrative and reproduce traditional femininities.

Contrary to traditional romantic narratives which position women as passive, Western postfeminist romantic narratives construct women as the pursuer, always on the lookout for ‘Mr Right’ (Genz, 2010). Further, postfeminist discourse encourages women to be unwilling to compromise their high standards in finding the perfect man (Gill, 2009). Consistent with this notion, the Japanese shoujo manga *Absolute Boyfriend* depicts Riiko as ‘designing’ her perfect boyfriend, to be made into a ‘robot boyfriend’. She explicitly selects her perceived desirable characteristics in a man as the following: “gets just a little bit jealous, a little forceful, humble, refreshing, kind, reliable, manly, adorably naïve, specialty in cooking, good reflexes, just a little perverted, a strong fighter, good hygiene, will save me when I’m in a tight spot, skilled, smart, cute and stylish”. Riiko’s extensive list of desirable characteristics is presented within a humorous context, the humour possibly intended to construct her having exceptionally high standards for an ‘ideal’ man as unrealistic. Through a postfeminist discourse, Riiko’s requirements construct her as selective and ‘empowered’ in doing so (Gill, 2009).

The characteristics Riiko explicitly states as desirable in a man are, however, consistent with the construction of a subordinated, traditional femininity (Wilde, 2014). Her selection of the characteristics: “a strong fighter” who “will save me when I’m in a tight spot” are reminiscent of romantic fiction heroes, which in turn work to position Riiko as a ‘damsel in distress’, awaiting rescue by her ‘knight in shining armour’ (Jackson, 2001). Her heroic positioning of her ideal boyfriend is further played out through her naming the robot ‘Night’, which may be read as a play on the word ‘knight’. Postfeminist narrations of romance also continue to construct women as ‘modern day damsels in distress’ who need rescuing from the contemporary problems faced by women. The progression from traditional, subordinate damsel to ‘modern day damsel in distress’ is therefore questionable, as women continue to be constructed as passively awaiting rescue (Stover, 2013).

Consistent with this construction, Riiko’s positioning as a modern day damsel in distress also maps onto the construction of her as unwilling to help herself, which could be read as self-infantilization (Jhally, 2009). Her positioning as a passive damsel in distress is played out in a scene where a group of young men harass Riiko to the point of tears, and Night appears instantly to defend her, hitting one of the boys. He threatens them: “Make my girlfriend cry again. And I won’t let it go this easily”, while Riiko is depicted as silently blushing in Night’s embrace. Within her positioning as a ‘damsel’, Riiko responds passively to her situation by not retaliating to the boys, and instead crying. Her passive response resonates with the passive responses of princesses in classic fairy tales, who wait to be saved by their princes (Wilde, 2014). Further, when read within the context of Japanese kawaii culture, Riiko’s crying may be read as asserting characteristics of traditional femininity such as purity and innocence (Kinsella, 1995). Conforming to traditional femininity continues to be constructed within postfeminist narrations of romance as advantageous to the heroines, as it is their femininity which is depicted as winning the hero’s heart (Gill & Herdieckerhoff,

2006). However, an alternate, contradictory Western reading of her crying works to infantilize Riiko negatively, as crying is undesirably associated with childishness and weakness. Her desire for her 'knight' to have a specialty in cooking may additionally suggest her intent on relying on him as her caregiver and positioning herself, once again, as infant. However, this could also be read alternatively as challenging discourses of dominant masculinity, both within the West and Japan, which positions cooking as an 'inferior' activity delegated to women (Stibbe, 2004).

Night's use of aggression conforms to a traditional discourse of masculinity that normalises men's aggression and competitiveness, and such characteristics are praised in men as predictive of corporate success (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Further, traditional romantic narratives often idealise the fusion of love and aggression (Jackson, 2001), constructing male aggression positively as an expression of love. Consistent with such constructions, Riiko lists the characteristics "gets just a little bit jealous" and "a little forceful" as desirable in a boyfriend. Her desire to have such characteristics within a partner could be read as orienting to an understanding of male aggression, or "forcefulness" within an intimate relationship as a desirable show of affection or as a display of sexual desire. However, the normalization and glamorizing of aggressive masculinities is detrimental to women, as it not only legitimizes an acceptance of subordinate positions for women, but it also blurs the line between romance and assault such as coercion (as discussed in *The Sexual Gatekeeper*, p.88).

This widespread construction of the 'ideal boyfriend' as the rescuer is also presented in *NANA*, which constructs a modern version of a prince who rescues the 'damsel' in a contemporary style: through financial and emotional support. In this case, Hachi's boyfriend Shouji is positioned as a prince, whose ability to provide such support is constructed as a necessity to Hachi, the 'damsel'. This is illustrated in the following conversation between

Hachi's friends Kyouzuke and Jun who are concerned about Hachi and Shouji's relationship as he has decided to enrol to study at an art school and will be unemployed for a few years.

Kyouzuke: "But Nana [Hachi] is a rational woman. I wonder if she's going to wait the years he will need to be able to provide for the both of them..."

Jun: "She probably won't... if she finds someone more mature, tolerant and with lots of money she'll probably dump him right away..."

Here, Kyouzuke positions Hachi as a "rational woman", and constructs her as a ruthless woman who would not remain in a heterosexual relationship where the male partner is unable to financially provide for the both of them. In Kyouzuke's construction, the "rational woman", Hachi, is simultaneously financially reliant on a male partner, yet possessing choice concerning whether or not she will continue her relationship. Financial reliance on a male partner contradicts the independent woman subjectivity central to postfeminist discourse. Further, in contrast to Nana's character who is constructed as a financially independent woman, Hachi's perceived reliance on a male partner negatively constructs her as subordinate and infantile. However, within a Japanese context, financial reliance on a male partner is normalized due to the financial restrictions on women arising from gender inequalities in employment, and so Hachi's situation may also be read as being consistent with the Japanese labour market and social context.

Jun's response similarly positions Hachi as a free-choosing subject, aligning with postfeminist constructions of femininity. In turn, she is constructed as having agency and choice in whether she will continue her relationship with Shouji or terminate it to 'upgrade' to another boyfriend based on his abilities to support her. Reminiscent of postfeminist discourse, she is positioned within an active role in her romantic relationships, systematically working through men and weighing up her options (Gill, 2009).

The Sexual Gatekeeper

The ‘sexual gatekeeper’ subject position exists in contrast to the postfeminist constructions of women as sexual beings who acquire empowerment through sexual agency, pleasure and skill (Gill, 2003). Despite these dominant postfeminist constructions, contradicting discourses of (hetero)sexuality continue to simultaneously position men as active subjects and women as passive objects of desire within sexual relationships (Allen, 2003). Such constructions position women as lacking sexual desires and physical pleasure, and men as dissociating emotion from their sexual desires. Allen claims these interweave in a contradictory way with normative discourses of sexuality. The constructions of the manga characters analysed in both *NANA* and *Absolute Boyfriend* were overall found to be more consistent with heteronormative sexualities which construct male protagonists as actively trying to engage in sexual relationships with the female characters, while the female characters were constructed as resisting and disinterested in sex. For example, in *Absolute Boyfriend*, one of the running jokes is the repeated depiction of Night’s consistent sexual advances towards Riiko, and her subsequent rejections. Periodically across the manga, Night asks Riiko to have sex with him within random contexts, as shown in the following extract:

Riiko: “I don’t feel up to going out...”

Night: “No? I guess that leaves just once thing to do... We can have sex.”

Riiko: “We’ll definitely be going out!”

Consistent with mainstream media which often normalise depictions of sexual harassment under guises of comedy and romance (Grauerholz & King, 1997), Night’s persistent unwanted sexual advances can clearly be identified as sexual harassment, yet is constructed as more desirable than problematic. The suddenness and randomness of Night’s advances obscure his harassment under a guise of humour, leaving it unaddressed and in turn

rendering it acceptable and minimized. It is further trivialised as normal and acceptable behaviour when read through the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984). The male sex drive discourse assumes a 'truth' where men hold a biological 'need' to have sex, and has claimed a strong presence within contemporary media which has normalised it. Night's repeated advances towards Riiko and spontaneous suggestions to have sex may be read through a male sex drive discourse, explaining his behaviour as a result of his biological urges.

Whereas Night is constructed as always desiring sex, Riiko's avoidance of his sexual proposals constructs her in contrast as having less sexual desire. However, through a contradictory permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984) which normalises women's sexual desire and activity, this disinterest in sex is constructed by postfeminism as problematic (Allen, 2003). In turn, the repeated depiction of Riiko rejecting Night's advances may be read through postfeminist lenses as positioning her undesirably as a 'gatekeeper' through the have and hold discourse (Hollway, 1984) which positions women as needing to manage male sexual urges. For example, in one scene, Riiko is depicted rejecting Night's sexual advances by telling him she is not ready to sleep with him. He is depicted as hurt through the use of shadowing on his face which also covers his eyes, while she is left feeling guilty, as shown by her internal monologue "... I... hurt... his feelings...? ... God! What's wrong with me!? Isn't it time I showed some determination? Night, I've never seen you look... so sad." As aforementioned, postfeminist discourses have heavily marketed the construction of women as being 'up for it' (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010), normalising a 'sexual woman' subjectivity which constructs women as powerful and liberated through the possession of a sexy body and enjoying sex. In turn, Riiko questions her decision to reject Night as a 'wrong' decision and positions herself as problematic and abnormal due to her failure to comply with idealised sexual desire as a woman. Contrary to this construction, she also refers to herself as needing

more ‘determination’, which constructs her lack of sexual desire as actively requiring effort on her part. Riiko’s construction of herself may be read as being consistent with the male sex drive discourses which position women as lacking the readily triggered sexual desire which men allegedly possess. Night’s behaviour of persistently asking Riiko to sleep with him, and then feeling hurt by her rejection is constructed as heteronormative male behaviour through dominant discourses of sexuality which normatively constructs women as submitting to male sexual advances (Hird & Jackson, 2001).

The heteronormative assumption that males are driven by their biological ‘need’ to have sex is also evident in *NANA* where such ‘truths’ legitimise sexual coercion as acceptable male behaviour. In a scene where Hachi and her male friend Shouji are staying in the same hotel room, he is depicted as making sexual advances towards Hachi and expressing his ‘need’ to sleep with her, although she had simply wanted to befriend him.

Hachi: “It’s ok, no worries. There are two beds anyways. I won’t attack you, so don’t worry.”

...

Shouji: “But if you’re all right with it, I’m not at all! I might attack you!”

Hachi: “Why...”?

Shouji: “Why?”

Hachi: “Aren’t we just friends?”

Shouji: “Nana (Hachi)... Do you really not know anything about guys? Because guys are capable of doing it even though there’s no love involved!”

...

Shouji: “But if you don’t want to, it’s ok. I’ll endure and get used to it”

...

Hachi: "Then if you tell me you love me, I will sleep with you"

Shouji: "What!?"

In this scene, Shouji positions himself within male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) as a victim of his biological urges to have sex in contrast to Hachi, who constructs herself as being in control of her sexual urges. He describes his lack of control over his biological urges through warning that he may "attack" her, a word which implies forceful sexual advances within the current context. Although Shouji's warning of a forceful sexual assertion might typically be read as a threat of rape, he legitimizes this through positioning her as being a temptation, therefore responsible for his natural sexual advances and urges towards her.

However, contrary to his concerns that he may "attack" Hachi, his coercive behaviour continues as he positions himself as a kind, understanding gentleman who would not force sex upon Hachi, but would put a considerable amount of effort (due to his 'biological' urges) to "endure and get used to it". The reiteration of his position as subject to his biological urges in turn positions Hachi negatively as cruelly denying Shouji of a biological need, a construction which could be read as intentionally produced to coerce her through guilt into having sex with him. Aligning with other media which construct such behaviour as a non-violent and normative within masculinity, his coercion is left unidentified and unaddressed.

In response to his coercion, Hachi offers to sleep with him under the condition that he tells her he loves her. In contrast to Shouji who constructs masculinity within dominant discourses of masculinity as not requiring love to have sex (Allen, 2003), Hachi is constructed as requiring an emotional connection to sex. This exchange of love for sex resonates with the have and hold discourse (Hollway, 1984) which assumes the 'truths' of male sex drive discourses (that men biologically 'need' sex) and positions women as an

asexual gender which perceives sex as a commodity to be traded with men in exchange for love, commitment and children.

The Pretty Woman

Postfeminist discourse constructs the body as central to the meanings of femininity, and consistently depict homogeneous portrayals of an ideal body, while also constructing the body as forever needing improvement (Gill, 2007). Gill claims that the possession of a 'hot' body is portrayed as important to contemporary female subjectivity, and she suggests that women are constantly under pressure to monitor and remodel their bodies and selves in order to conform to a 'hot', sexy standard. The heroines within postfeminist media are often constructed as conforming to the universal standard of 'ideal' beauty, however simultaneously positioned within the postfeminist makeover paradigm as self-disciplining, consumers of products which promise 'improvement' and 'beauty' (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006).

Consistent with postfeminist popular culture, the shoujo manga (and shounen manga) analysed produced homogeneous constructions of the 'ideal' female physical aesthetic, and simultaneously constructed characters as being dissatisfied with their current appearance. The heroines of both *NANA* and *Absolute Boyfriend* possessed young, thin bodies (Nana's weight is explicitly stated to be 43kg at 162cms tall, Hachi's 48kg at 158cm) and facial characteristics consistent with 'beautiful' anime girls such as large eyes, pointed chins, and small noses and mouths. However, both titles present the heroines as scrutinizing the appearance of their bodies and conforming to notions of transformation and improvement as intrusively prescribed by postfeminist discourse. For example, Hachi in the title *NANA* exemplifies embodied dissatisfaction through attributing her appearance as the reason why she remains single: "It must be because I'm not attractive enough. That's why I'm going on a

diet! Have to get a body like Noriko's". Postfeminist constructions of the female body as central to a woman's identity play out through Hachi's perception that her body is the reason why she has not found a boyfriend. Further, her scrutinizing gaze constructs her body as flawed, and requiring work such as dieting in order to fix it. This is consistent with the postfeminist normalization of women's bodies as always requiring surveillance, forever needing improvement, and open to scrutiny by both men and women (Gill, 2007). Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) claim that postfeminist discourse constructs the possession of a fat body as a site of failure, creating harmful anxieties within women that propel them into working towards losing weight. These discursive effects are regularly criticized by scholars for promoting a damaging 'beauty myth', that destroys women's self-esteem and leads to potentially harmful practices such as dieting and surgery (Wolf, 1990). However, postfeminist discourse consistently normalizes weight obsession and dieting as a requirement of ideal femininity (Gill, 2009). As a thin woman who nonetheless constructs her need to lose weight, Hachi typifies the anxiety postfeminism presents to women- that they are always 'flawed', and must continue to work harder towards a goal of perfection (e.g. losing more weight). Hachi's model of 'perfection' is Noriko and she states that she desires a body "like Noriko's", a celebrity. Celebrity women are regularly presented within postfeminist media as possessing the 'ideal' body which in turn constructs them as both successful and attractive (Evans & Riley, 2013). Hachi's desire to look like a celebrity may be read by female audiences as a relatable struggle faced by contemporary women- the pressure to possess the body which has been constructed as the 'ideal', yet unattainable, as women know that images of celebrity bodies are regularly manipulated through editing.

Similar to Hachi, the character Riiko also experiences body dissatisfaction. From the first pages of *Absolute Boyfriend*, readers are introduced to her concerns about her chest being too small, as she is depicted measuring her breasts with a measuring tape, and registers

her subsequent disappointment realising that her “bust up” treatment that she just purchased had not enlarged her breasts: “Top, 31.5... they haven’t... gotten any bigger... I absolutely will not buy from street vendors again!!” Postfeminist discourses of femininity construct the contemporary woman as being sexually confident and possessing a ‘sexy body’ (Gill, 2008), which is characterised as a slim body with large breasts. Although Riiko is not constructed as a sexually confident woman, her comment positions her as a postfeminist subject through her ‘failure’ to achieve the curvaceous sexy body ideal and her consumption of a product (“bust up”) to improve her bust size and bring her closer to the ideal. As for women in the ‘lived world’, Riiko’s hopes that by simply purchasing a product (e.g. breast enlargement pills) her breasts will ‘improve’, is readily understood within a context of the beauty industry’s aggressive advertising which promises miracles, freedom and choice (Lazar, 2009).

From a Japanese cultural perspective, both Riiko and Hachi also characterize the culture’s appearance norms, in particular, the ‘cuteness’ of ‘kawaii’ culture as discussed earlier (p.19). Both women have large, round eyes, wear light coloured, frilly clothing and dresses and are often drawn alongside symbols of traditional femininity such as hearts and flowers. In contrast to Hachi and Riiko, the character Nana is presented as a punk rocker who rejects the hyperfeminine appearance and behaviour and is more consistent with a masculine style. In contrast to the conventional female manga characters, she has short black hair, tattoos, and dresses only wearing dark colours such as black, red and purple. Her abandonment of normative femininity underlines her claim to the regular subordination of empowerment in contrast to Hachi and the other ‘hyperfeminine’ female characters. Nana’s relative ‘empowerment’ is consistent with Paechter’s claims that the rejection of normative femininity is a “claiming of power” (2006, p. 257), as it in turn rejects the disempowerment associated with it. Further, Nana’s rejection of hyperfemininity could be read through a feminist discourse as empowering her to break through the restrictions of gender.

Nana's individuality constructs her as a 'cool' character who is often admired by Hachi and her fans. However, despite her construction as a woman rebelling against the prescribed norms of femininity through her 'punk rock' image and rejection of hyperfemininity, Nana is nonetheless an attractive character whose physical features conform to the uniform beauty ideals of manga. The celebration of Nana's individuality in *NANA* contradicts the ridicule of Kimiko's individuality in *Gintama*, a further reflection of society's marginalization of women who do not physically conform to the prescribed ideal body type, and are in turn denied the freedom to wear what they want (Lazar, 2011).

The Domestic Woman

Postfeminism constructs the contemporary young woman as ambitious towards careers which challenge traditional gender stereotypes, a cultural shift which McRobbie (2007) describes as a "new sexual contract". Reflective of the changing times, shoujo manga depicted the female manga characters as being employed and ambitious in seeking a successful career, but the jobs were underpaid and unsatisfactory, which as Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) claim, may be a possible reproduction of reality. For example, Hachi from *NANA* works as an "office lady" in a magazine company. Within a Japanese context, Japanese women are restricted to the clerical "office lady" role regardless of their qualifications, where they perform menial tasks around the workplace which often reflect the traditional housewife role (Ogi, 2003). Typical of this role, the manga rarely shows Hachi doing tasks typical of Western clerical jobs but instead carrying out tasks such as pouring the coffee of her male co-workers. Her dissatisfaction with her job and subordinate role within the workplace is particularly evident in an internal monologue, where she describes her role within the company as having "nothing to do with the content of the magazine" and "only small jobs without any interest".

Her role within the workplace is further iterated through scenes which depict the ways she is treated by her male co-workers, and the condescending ways they speak to her, as evident by her boss' comments: "Good job my little Nana (Hachi). Wanna have a drink with me tonight?" The boss' comment positions Hachi as subordinate to himself in several ways. He belittles and infantilizes her within paternal discourses through addressing her as his "little Nana", reminiscent of how a parent would speak to a small child, rather than the way a boss would refer to his employees within a workplace setting. Although within a Japanese context where hierarchy within society is emphasised, especially in the workplace, it is arguable that the older male boss would not speak to his male employees this way. He also inappropriately asks her to have a drink with him after work, which she responds to with a rejection. Here, she is evidently uncomfortable as she is drawn with sweat beads on her face as she rejects him. However, in contrast to the typical normalization and minimization of sexual harassment within manga (as discussed previously), Hachi identifies her boss as "the kind of person to commit sexual harassment", suggesting a moment of empowerment through naming the behaviour and then standing against it. Hachi's refusal of her boss' advances counter the complicit, submissive femininity constructed in traditional discourses of femininity. Although traditional discourses of femininity are dominant in the manga, other small disruptions are also evident.

A particularly notable disruption is the construction of the heroines of both *NANA* and *Absolute Boyfriend* as comically lacking domestic skills, positioning them as 'failures' of traditional femininity (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). For example, when Soushi of *Absolute Boyfriend* enters Riiko's apartment, he comments "This is gross, aren't you a woman?", when he notices the messy state of her apartment. His comment positions Riiko outside of normative traditional femininity, within which women are expected to be skilled at domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning. Within the context of Japanese society, Soushi's denial

of Riiko's femininity could be read as regulatory, working to encourage Riiko to comply with the domestic ideal within traditional femininity discourse.

The conflict of femininity with domestic prowess on the part of male characters is particularly well illustrated in a scene in *NANA* where Nana, Hachi and their friends have gathered to eat dinner together.

Nobu: "Whoa, this is hella good! I am so awed! You're gonna be a great wife one day, Nana (Hachi)! You're called Nana too, but you're so different!"

Nana: "Well, thank you. I made that stew."

Nobu: "Oh, no wonder. I was thinking it tasted kinda sour"

Nobu tries some of the stew and makes the assumption that Hachi had made it, although it was Nana's stew. He comments that because Hachi is good at cooking, she would make a "great wife", equating domestic prowess with the 'good wife' subject position. However, when he finds out that the character Nana had actually made the stew, he is surprised and comments that the stew had tasted sour. His assumption that Hachi had made the soup underlines the opposing constructions of Hachi as typically feminine, and Nana as a counter 'other'. However, despite the 'knowledge' (of the manga reader) that Hachi is unskilled at cooking, Nobu's change of tone from being polite towards Hachi, and harsher towards Nana highlights the regulation of the non-conforming woman, whether or not she has skills associated with traditional femininity.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the key femininities and subjectivities made available within shoujo manga have been identified and explored. Both *Absolute Boyfriend* and *NANA* constructed the manga heroines within subject positions of the independent woman, the damsel in distress, the sexual gatekeeper, the pretty woman and the domestic woman. In contrast to the

femininities and subjectivities identified in the shounen manga titles analysed in this study, those identified within the shoujo manga may be read as engaging with the problems and desires faced by Japanese women from a female protagonist's perspective. However, consistent with the titles plotlines which revolved around romantic narratives, the majority of subjectivities offered were primarily limited to those available within romantic discourses. Although femininities consistent with postfeminist discourses were also present through subjectivities such as the independent woman, they were constantly undermined in scenarios where postfeminist notions of independence and freedom were challenged.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The overarching goal of this thesis was to identify the constructions of femininity produced within manga. More specifically, the study was interested in investigating these constructions within the social context of contemporary Japan, where traditional Japanese culture intersects with more global postfeminist influences. The research examined four titles within two genres of manga; shounen, which is targeted at a young male demographic, and shoujo which is targeted at a young female demographic. Overall, the study highlighted the limited meanings of femininity made available to young female audiences of shoujo manga through its postfeminist, empty representations of ‘empowerment’ whilst also identifying the dominance of problematic sexist portrayals of young women in shounen manga. This chapter begins by discussing the disempowering femininities associated with inequitable gender representations found across the manga analysed in this thesis. This is followed by a discussion of the contradictory meanings of contemporary femininity produced through an intertwining of postfeminist and traditional discourses of femininity in both the manga genres. The chapter concludes with a reflective consideration of the thesis and some potential implications of its findings.

Disempowering Femininities

The majority of protagonists presented within the shounen manga were male and there were very few central female characters, making available limited femininities in quality and quantity across the genre. Key female characters were often positioned within traditional femininity discourses as inferior in intelligence and independence to male characters, infantilized or as subordinate to men.

Disappointingly, from a feminist perspective, misogynistic ideologies were normalized within the manga analysed, particularly in the shounen titles. For example, shounen manga ridiculed women's bodies that did not conform to the prescribed 'ideal' aesthetic, yet rationalized such misogynist practice under a guise of humour. *Gintama*, for example, depicted Kimiko as having a larger body and possessing exaggerated characteristics which contradict the prescribed 'ideal' (e.g. small eyes, large nose and dramatic makeup), features that drew mockery and even dehumanization from the male protagonists. Instances of such misogynistic practices perpetrated by male characters were only recognized as undesirable behaviour when the misogyny was targeted at young female characters who possessed an 'ideal' body type. This disturbing use of humour appeared again in *Gintama* where it was used to discriminate against the transsexual character Saigou whose non-conformity to the gender binary led to ridicule and labelling as a monster by the manga's protagonists. The presence and acceptance of such sexist humour resonates with the 'new lad', a Western contemporary form of masculinity which embodies "traditional masculine values of sexism, exclusive male friendship and homophobia" (Benwell, 2007, p. 2), and legitimizes its sexist views within a contemporary society through its self-awareness and 'irony'. Using the guise of humour as a tool to target particular groups of people is a disempowering way of silencing resistance, as those positioned as targets of ridicule become perceived as being 'too serious' (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong et al., 2008). However, this type of sexist humour was absent from shoujo manga, an exclusion which suggests that shoujo manga may be more accepting of different femininities, whereas shounen manga works within more restrictive, narrow gender norms. On the one hand, shounen manga in this study overwhelmingly constructed women's bodies in sexist ways, while on the other hand, shoujo manga positioned the female body as a source of empowerment through the deployment of postfeminist discourses (discussed later in this chapter).

Sexism in shounen manga also played out through the very limited constructions of working women. This was consistent with Matanle et al.'s (2014) findings regarding the sexist portrayals of working female manga characters where women were either excluded from careers or negatively constructed as being 'too masculine'. In *Death Note*, Misa and Naomi were the only female characters who had careers, while *Gintama* rarely depicted women as being employed in roles outside of the entertainment industry. The majority of female characters in both titles were employed in 'feminine' industries where sociability and beauty trump brains; Misa as a model, Otae as a hostess, and many other women as prostitutes. Although the character Naomi from *Death Note* was an FBI agent, a career considered to be 'masculine' within traditional discourses, she faced pressure from her fiancée to terminate her 'dangerous' role and instead take up a domestic position as a housewife and mother. In doing so, *Death Note* reinforced not only the traditional restriction of women to the domicile, but also the construction of a woman's career as temporary and hence not as serious as a man's career. Further, although *Death Note* presented many workplace scenarios, female workers were excluded from those associated with masculinity (police, leading roles in large companies). These shounen manga may merely reflect the reality of gender inequality in Japan as Japanese women do face difficulties in finding satisfying employment (Ogi, 2003). However, the key concern is the normalization and acceptance of such exclusions that such representations reinforce.

The sexist notion that women are subordinate to men also plays out through the 'damsel in distress' subjectivity. This subjectivity claims an ongoing presence and acceptance in Western cinema (Stover, 2013) and prominently in videogames (Dietz, 1998) despite its sexist construction of women as weak, dependent and helpless. Stover suggests that when coupled with feminist signifiers (or even postfeminist symbols of 'empowerment'), the disempowering aspects of the 'damsel in distress' subjectivity becomes ignored and lost.

Likewise, both shounen and shoujo manga accept the traditional construction of women as being the weaker sex and requiring the rescue of a male protagonist through the 'damsel in distress' subjectivity. In particular, the romantic narratives of shoujo manga consistently depicted contemporary women being rescued by a male protagonist (to the extent that in *Absolute Boyfriend*, Night's name alluded to his role as a knight). Interestingly, a modern version of the 'damsel' was also identified in *NANA* through Hachi - instead of physically being rescued from an enemy, she is constructed as requiring financial rescue by her boyfriend.

Disempowering constructions of femininity were further maintained through the reproduction of the problematic dominant male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1989), especially within the romantic contexts of the shoujo genre. The male sex drive constructs men as possessing a biological need to actively satisfy their uncontrollable sexual urges, and as wanting and ready for sex at all times (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Women are normatively positioned, in relation to men, as the 'sexual gatekeeper' and responsible for the maintenance of men's sexual urges (Hollway, 1989). The 'sexual gatekeeper' subjectivity works to disempower women who do not conform to its normalized expectation of women to submit to men's sexual urges. This disempowerment of women played out in both shoujo manga titles, as both Hachi (*NANA*) and Riiko (*Absolute Boyfriend*) were depicted rejecting the sexual propositions of the male characters, an action which was constructed as being problematic within their romantic narrations. A male sex drive discourse has also been described in the literature as disempowering for women, not only through positioning women as passive sexual objects, but also through its capacity to be used to justify sexual coercion (i.e. Through the construction of men as being unable to control their sexual urges) (Jackson & Cram, 2003). Use of the discourse within shoujo manga is particularly problematic, as sexual coercion is constructed as normative male behaviour for a targeted young, female audience.

However, these findings differed from Gwynne's (2013) findings on male-authored manga where young female characters were constructed as having sexual agency.

Contemporary Femininities

The 'contemporary woman' is regularly produced through postfeminist media (such as *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City*) as 'having it all' (Arthurs, 2003). Postfeminism claims to reap the benefits of having achieved gender equality (McRobbie, 2004), celebrating its notions of 'empowerment' through such means as individualism and choice (Gill, 2007). However, scholars have argued that postfeminist means to 'empowerment' are littered with contradictions (e.g. Gill, 2003, Arthurs, 2003), which ultimately render them as being an empty and useless 'false feminism' (Kim, 2001). The young, female manga characters (especially in shoujo manga) produced the postfeminist 'contemporary woman' construction, and the problematic contradictions that characterize her.

In the West, postfeminist media persistently constructs the contemporary woman through the empowered 'independent woman', who no longer 'needs a man'. Through a postfeminist lens, the contemporary 'independent woman' reaps the benefits of modern gender equality as she is financially independent and free to pursue her dream career (Lotz, 2001, McRobbie, 2007). However, postfeminist media is contradictory, simultaneously depicting negative constructions of being single (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006) such as constructing the 'independent woman' as being 'incomplete' and responsible for finding a heterosexual partner. Although the 'independent woman' was not presented in shounen manga, she was heavily identified in shoujo manga (particularly in *NANA*). For example, the character Nana aligned with postfeminist constructions of the 'independent woman' as an emphasis was placed on her freedom through not being 'tied down' by a man. However, similarly to postfeminist media, her 'empowerment' through the 'independent woman'

subjectivity is quickly contradicted as her independence is subsequently constructed as the problematic cause of her loneliness. Put simply, although on one hand the ‘independent woman’ subjectivity is constructed as the epitome of ‘empowerment’, it is simultaneously constructed as coming at a price ultimately rooted in unhappiness and loneliness (Kim, 2001). Similar constructions underpinned portrayals of characters’ desires towards a heterosexual relationship, a desire that was central to all of the key female shoujo characters. Consistent with the contemporary independent woman’s empowerment through positioning herself as the active pursuer of a relationship and the male ‘targets’ as passive objects, Hachi of *NANA* was depicted as actively pursuing several men in the hopes of getting into a heterosexual relationship. However, such means towards ‘empowerment’ is problematic, as the obsessive pursuit towards a relationship constructed in shoujo manga continues to conform to a traditional discourse which posits that love is the ultimate means to happiness for women.

Postfeminist media also widely offer ‘empowered’ female characters through expressions of ‘girl power’ which embodies notions of female self-belief, assertion, independence and escaping sexism (Ferguson, 2004). Within fictional media, ‘girl power’ is often produced through a superheroine character who possesses superhuman strengths and is depicted as defeating enemies or physically overpowering the male characters (D’Amore, 2008). Such characters were also made available in the shounen manga analysed, empowered through their ability to exert superhuman strengths and fight alongside the male heroes. Superhuman strength was identified as the key form of female empowerment in shounen manga, as women were otherwise constructed as being weaker or subordinate to men. However, this single form of ‘empowerment’ for women in the shounen genre is empty, given that superhuman strength is unrealistic and constructed as only being attainable through abandoning femininity. For example, throughout *Gintama*, it was reiterated through characters such as Tsukuyo and Saigou that one must abandon their ‘femininity’ in order to

gain strength. In other words, 'empowerment' was only offered to female characters in shounen manga through masculine constructions of power. The abandonment of femininity by superheroines in manga aligns with Western constructions of heroines who are constructed with masculine qualities and an absence of feminine qualities (Kirkland, 2010). These findings differed to Grigsby's (1998) findings of the superheroine characters in shoujo manga who were 'empowered' through postfeminist notions of hyperfemininity.

On the other hand, the postfeminist notion of hyper-femininity is characterized as an exaggerated collection of all characteristics, behaviours and interests traditionally associated with femininity (Gill, 2007), and claims a strong presence in both the West and Japan. It is constructed within postfeminist discourses as a key means to empowerment through its association with success and exclusivity, as one must perform hyper-femininity 'correctly' (Allan, 2009). It is translated into a Japanese context as a 'kawaii culture', or cute culture (p.19) which similarly celebrates petiteness, vulnerable and innocent social behaviours and a childlike physical appearance (Kinsella, 1995). A striking consistency between the shounen and shoujo manga was the way the main female characters adhered to the Japanese 'cute culture'. For example, all of the key characters were drawn with a 'cute' appearance and often exerted childlike behaviour. However, the way 'cute' characters were represented differed markedly across the two genres. For example, the shounen manga *Death Note* constructed the character Misa, who positioned herself within a 'cute woman' subjectivity, as being infantilized, subordinated and, in turn, not being taken seriously by the male characters. Moreover, her cuteness was associated with negative characteristics such as naivety and a lack of intelligence. In contrast, the 'cute woman' in shoujo manga (Hachi and Riiko) aligned with postfeminist notions of hyper-femininity, and was constructed positively as feminine and desirable. The 'ero-kawaii woman' subjectivity, a term for the 'cute woman' who is simultaneously eroticized in her presentation, featured prominently in shounen manga, in

particular portrayed by the character Misa in *Death Note*. Strikingly, the ‘ero-kawaii woman’ was excluded from shoujo manga but ample within the shounen genre, strengthening an argument that shounen manga construct female characters for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) of its male audience.

Like the ‘cute woman’, the ‘pretty woman’ peppered both genres, consistent with both traditional and postfeminist discourses which require women to conform to an ‘ideal’ physical aesthetic. Postfeminism positions the body as central to contemporary femininity, and presents the possession of the ‘ideal’ body (possession of a slim body and ‘feminine’ physical features such as large breasts) as a woman’s key source of power (Gill, 2007). In particular, postfeminism places an emphasis on a ‘makeover paradigm’ which subjects the female body to “constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling” (Gill, 2007, p.149) in order to gain and maintain the ‘ideal body’. Similar to the treatment of the ‘cute woman’ across the two genres, these self-monitoring practices were treated very differently. Consistent with postfeminist discourses, self-monitoring was normalized in shoujo manga, where such concerns were constructed as a necessity and a key means to empowerment for women. In particular, an emphasis on possessing large breasts was identified in *Absolute Boyfriend*- the manga opens with a depiction of Riiko measuring her breasts after consuming a product which promised to enhance their size. Although postfeminism promises a personal sense of ‘empowerment’ through consuming beauty practices (Amy-Chinn, 2006), this emphasis on breasts may suggest that this means to empowerment simply regulates women to become sexually pleasing for the male gaze. Further, in shounen manga, the possession of an ‘ideal body’ was negatively associated with being unintelligent, evident through the construction of Misa (*Death Note*) who was positioned as the ‘dumb blonde’ drawing on the traditional beauty discourse (Greenwood & Ishbell, 2002). Although her aesthetic beauty signals empowerment and success within a postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2007), her

construction within the shounen genre as a ‘dumb blonde’ adheres to traditional discourses which instead disempowers her and positions her as inferior to the male characters. Finally, and in contrast to shoujo manga, shounen manga constructed self-monitoring negatively as an unintelligent, feminine concern.

Reflections

The discourse analyses of femininity in manga has illuminated the largely restrictive femininities produced by dominant discourses in this popular Japanese media form. However, these findings are necessarily constrained by several limitations to the study. First, it must be considered that the study was unable to collect data from every volume of each title, due to the time restrictions of completing a Masters project. Consequently, possible data from later chapters were excluded from the analysis, and I was unable to observe any changes to constructions of femininity that may have occurred. As many fictional narratives often feature themes of personal growth within characters, it is possible that such data were missed. Further, Western literature informed much of this thesis in the absence of access to Japanese material which may have offered different perspectives. Thus, the findings are limited to Western contexts and may not have considered all the relevant cultural factors. Nonetheless, the use of Western literature enabled comparison of femininity in Japanese manga with those in Western media, which advantageously added depth to the analysis. It must also be noted that this analysis was executed within a poststructuralist framework, offering one particular reading of the data out of many other possible readings. Finally, a possible limitation to consider was my position as a New Zealand born Japanese researcher. My own opinions and cultural knowledge need to be considered, particularly as some themes within the research topic induced strong emotions and opinions. However, such positioning may also be advantageous, as background knowledge and understanding of both Japanese and Western cultures proved useful to the analysis.

Future studies may include the identification of femininities in other products which are specifically marketed using manga characters and characteristics. As discussed earlier (p.9) many products in Japan such as cosmetics use manga characters in their advertising and campaigns. An extension study which includes the use of data from anime and videogames would extend the scope and depth of the study. As discussed in the Introduction chapter, anime and video games are perceived to be in a similar industry to manga comics (p.9), but anime and video games may offer further depth to characters than manga. For example, in video games, players are offered the unique opportunity to role-play the protagonist, and actively make decisions on what will happen next. Further, anime is arguably consumed at a higher rate than manga internationally, therefore may offer femininities which are more contextually accepted within a Western society. The influence of manga has been evident outside the realms of manga comics, as many products marketed as being related to manga characters are popular in Japan and, increasingly, overseas. For example, the culture of ‘cosplay’ where participants strive to dress up like their favourite characters is becoming increasingly popular internationally. Further, many cosmetic products which assist consumers in appearing more character-like are becoming increasingly available, evident in both Japan and overseas through the popularity of products such as ‘circle lenses’ (contact lenses which enlarge the appearance of pupils to look more like those of manga characters) in Asia, and the 2015 release of L’Oréal’s ‘Miss Manga’ mascara, claiming to enlarge the appearance of the eyes for the “ultimate wide-eyed manga look” (L’Oréal, 2015).

With this commodification of manga femininity in mind, a question arising from my analyses in this thesis is ‘what might these representations of femininity mean for young female audiences?’ First, striving to look like a manga character is arguably detrimental to young women, as manga not only presents an even narrower construction of the ‘ideal’ body, but the unrealistic proportions of the body offered by manga may add to the already

problematic pressures on young women to fit the ideal. In contrast to mainstream media in both Japan and internationally, where fashion models consistently construct the ‘ideal body’, manga characters can be (and are) drawn to depict each ‘ideal’ physical characteristic in an exaggerated way (e.g. larger breasts, larger eyes, thinner) and be drawn in ways that are physically impossible. Second, the gains in popularity of manga in Japan and internationally (this research specifically selected titles which have been internationally successful), may have implications on how overseas readers come to understand Japanese women. The limited femininities presented in manga may work to normalize disempowering femininities for Japanese women, reinforcing views of them as submissive, passive and dependent. As a young Japanese woman living in a Westernized culture, this kind of normalization is particularly concerning as I have experienced the consequences first hand, where people expect me to possess such characteristics and treat me accordingly.

Although there were minimal instances of feminist femininities identified in the current study, other manga have produced female characters who challenge disempowering femininities (e.g. Winry the female mechanic from *Full Metal Alchemist* and the strong female characters of *Claymore*). Further, other Japanese media such as television dramas (e.g. *Mondai no aru restaurant*) have begun to directly acknowledge and address the previously suppressed issues of gender inequality and discrimination. These changes suggest a potential for future Japanese manga to also offer a wider range of femininities to audiences that are empowered in a feminist matter rather than in postfeminist terms.

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