

# **A Comparison of Gender Aspects in Japanese and U.S Chat Fiction Mobile Applications**

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## **Abstract**

Chat fiction is a type of mobile application that provides a story through the medium of text messages. It is described as new literature, which is especially targeted at teenagers according to reports in the tech media. The readers read the text message that appears on the smartphone and tap the screen to obtain more information by viewing more messages. While it might be an unusual experience for those not familiar with the genre, soon after chat fiction mobile applications appeared, they began dominating the mobile application sales charts. While chat fiction originates in the U.S., it has also now spread to Japan. However, there are noticeable differences between chat novels in the U.S. and Japan. Although Japanese chat fiction follows many patterns found in its U.S. counterpart, it also has some unique features that tend to occur frequently in Japanese media culture, which is singularity and stereotypes of gender. This research note outlines a future research project whose aim is to understand these cultural differences in terms of gender issues by exploring the following research question: “What are the differences between U.S. chat fiction and Japanese chat fiction from a gender perspective, and how do gender issues influence the story and character?”

## **1. Introduction and Background**

With the development of digital technology, the shape of media culture is changing. One example is the change in the culture of reading. Nowadays, it is common to read books in the digital format using a smartphone, tablet or computer. For instance, magazines on digital devices tend to be more popular than printed magazines because of their accessibility and interactivity (Wang et al. 2016). Chat fiction is another digital literary form where you read a text message and know the story from only the text conversation. There is no additional information about the background, situation or characters. Although this style of presentation looks new and remarkable, the stories themselves are the same as printed books that we are familiar with. Chat fiction mobile applications were first developed in the U.S., but the trend made its way to Japan around 2018, with a local chat fiction mobile application appearing in Japan as well. Although Japanese and American chat mobile applications seem similar, their societal and cultural background inevitably influences them. While both are categorized as chat fiction, there are remarkable differences in terms of story and character design. Although Japanese chat mobile application launched after the U.S. ones, they

seem to reflect a considerable number of aspects of Japanese culture that they share with Japan’s animation and games.

### **1.1 Chat Fiction**

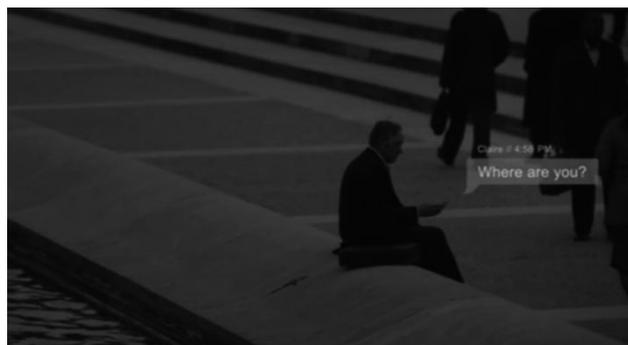


Figure1. Text messaging in TV series  
The example of the utilization of chat-style design mimicking text messaging in films and TV series.  
(House of Cards, American TV series, 2013)

The first chat fiction mobile application is said to have been HOCK, which was released in 2015. Its total downloads in March 2017 were 2.22 million (Hartmans, 2017). After HOCK, several more chat mobile applications have been published. The prominent feature of chat fiction



is its use of chat-style design mimicking text messaging, which is an aesthetic that has also been used in films and TV series (figure1).

### 1.2 YARN: the Evolution of the American Chat App

YARN is a similar mobile application to HOCK, also developed in the U.S.; however, there are more gamified aspects to this mobile application. For instance, the mobile application sometimes prompts the user to make a choice, and the story changes depending on the user's preference. Furthermore, another significant feature is that the mobile application asks the user to watch videos that imitate Instagram and listen to audio to encourage users to interact with the content. Chat fiction mobile applications could be described as being similar to interactive fiction and visual novels in that they focus on the enjoyment of the story itself, which, while offering diverse contents, is mainly, composed of text (JIANG, 2016). In many of the titles offered on YARN, the story unfolds on a screen that mimics a text message chat screen. The screens are simple and are designed to look precisely like text message screens. In some titles, live-action footage is used for dramatic effect. Live-action footage seems to imitate, for instance, Apple's video telephony service FaceTime or Instagram stories. It would bring user feeling, such as using a smartphone while they read the stories.

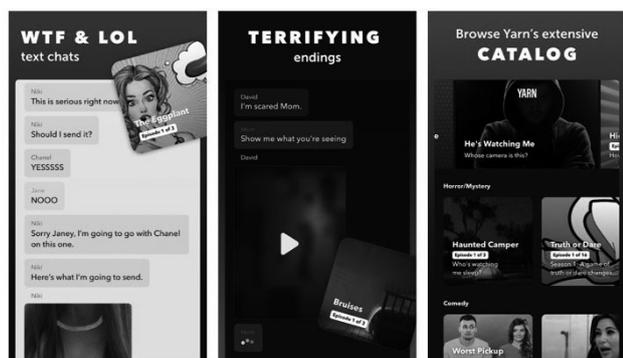


Figure 2. YARN  
Images of YARN's App Store page

### 1.3 peep: a Japanese Chat Fiction App

Peep is one of the famous chat fiction mobile applications in Japan. This mobile application was released in 2019. Since the mobile application was published, it has been downloaded by over 1 million users. The mechanics and system of this mobile application are, at first glance, similar to YARN. However, peeps do not only distribute

chat fiction works, but also works in the form of comics, which make use of illustrations, and video works, which use full-length images. Moreover, it seems like peep generally adopts a more animated character aesthetic.

One notable difference is that, while stories in YARN are mostly standalone narratives unconnected to other media, peep forms a part of Japan's broader media mix (PR TIMES, 2018).

One of our most successful productions to date has been a story named "Kankin Kuiki Level X" (confinement area Level X). This story first published as a mobile application-based chat fiction novel but became so popular it was later published as a manga comic book. Also, famous voice actors such as Satō Satomi, who is mainly known for her anime work on projects such as K-On!, have recorded voice-overs for the content of the app to add extra value for the readers.



Figure 3. Peep  
The advertisement of Kankin Kuiki Level X  
(peep's App Store page)

It is not uncommon for works initially distributed as novels on the mobile application to then be illustrated and republished as new works involving famous actors. Peep published a story by inspiring a popular game and created characters' products such as figurines and T-shirts to promote their campaign. Steinberg (2015, chap. 3, 4) explains that throughout Japanese media culture, character business methods have been developed into different media such as films, novels and comics, forming a transmedia mix that moves between media. Peep appears to be characterized as a medium that combines the transmedia mix. Although peep is a new type of media, there already seems to include some of the features of Japanese media culture that Steinberg points out.

## 2. Gender Issues

## 2.1 Gender Issues in Japan

It has recently been pointed out that the gender gap between men and women is still large in Japan. Few women occupy top positions in either industry or politics (Dalton, 2019). Ito (2019) notes that although Finland had the highest female labor force participation rate among OECD countries, and Japan was second in 1970, Japan has lagged behind the global movement towards gender equality that has taken place over the past 30 years. In the United States and European countries, women's participation in the labor force moved for equality and responsibility within the family, including childcare and balancing work with housework. This phenomenon has strengthened family policies such as nursery schools and child allowances during this period. On the other hand, Japan's economic growth and the establishment of the model case of long working hours and sufficient income for men, and housework and part-time jobs for women since the mid-1970s have created a social tendency rejects, rather than promotes, women's participation in society. This seems to be believed to affect current gender problems in Japan.

Also, sexism such as sexual harassment and misogyny continue to happen, and the issues have had a severely negative effect on Japanese society. In Japan, gender-based discrimination is rampant in university entrance exams, and sexual harassment is a constant problem. However, recently, the gender movement such as #metoo that occurred, in western countries, influenced Japanese society and inevitably that Japanese people raised their voices to denounce gender issues (Ueno, 2019).

## 2.2 Gender Issues in Japanese Media

The impact of the media on gender attitudes has been an issue of concern and debate. Fujimura and Itoh (2004) explain that children are greatly influenced by television animation about their gender issues. The personalities and behavior of the characters in the animation often contain stereotypical representations of men and women. Many animations also seek to be cute in appearance and gesture, suggesting that this includes the potential to increase gender stereotyping.

Hayakawa (2016) also pointed out that it is not only animation and comic where gender stereotype is observed but also in official documents such as a poster for instruction. He presents an advertisement to educate people about parenting where the boys are encouraged to be strong and active while girls are taught to be compassionate and

kind. He referred to Projects to Promote the Formation of a Gender-Equal Society led by the Japanese government. He argued that gender stereotype was socially and culturally formed, which has a significant relationship to media expression.

## 2.3 Examining Gender Depictions in Anime Culture and Its Influence on Japanese Society

Animated characters are often seen as a contentious issue in Japanese society when used in content targeted at adult audiences. One of the reasons is the relationship between animation culture and "otaku" culture (Morikawa, 2012). For some time, there has been debate about what contexts are appropriate for animated characters to be used. For instance, an issue that has recently become a topic of debate is the use of animated characters depicting female high school students as the main characters in projects being promoted by the Ministry of the Environment as measures against global warming. Not only the appearance, but the background behind the characters was debatable (Haefelin, 2020).

In Japan, high school girls who appear in games and anime are often given stereotyped roles characterized by cuteness, obedience, and inability to study. Some people felt that the characters created by the Ministry of the Environment encouraged these kinds of stereotypes. Therefore, the use of these characters was controversial and offensive to some.



Figure. 4 Character of the Ministry of the Environment (Ministry of the Environment "COOL CHOICE" official website)

However, many others receive the animated characters favorably. For many, this may be connected to their greater exposure to anime and video game culture.

Whether or not the use of two-dimensional animated characters is viewed favorably may depend on the individual's personal background, yet in Japanese society

at large, characters that appear in anime and games are used as a matter of course even in public discourse, which the Ministry of the Environment case illustrates. Conversely, the use of such characters is not a tradition found in many Western countries.

### 3. Methodology

In this study, content analysis is selected to comprehend the chat fiction mobile application YARN (the U.S.) and peep (Japan). Ford et al. (1998) used content analysis to analyze gender stereotypes in Japanese magazine advertisements, and explained that content analysis can provide indication for theoretical analysis of gender portrayal and representation.

For this analysis, we have chosen the most popular titles in the category of love (Table1). To distinguish the most popular one, YARN uses the number of viewers noted on the mobile application. At the same time, peep has established awards based on its readers' overall ratings and has selected five nominees in each category. For this analysis, the most popular novels were chosen in the Love category in 2020.

Table 1. Chat fiction title

|              | Genre | Title   |
|--------------|-------|---|
| U.S (YARN)   | Love  | Modern Dating                                       |
| Japan (peep) |       | “Hajimete” dakara, daiji ni shitene?                |
|              | Love  | (“It’s my first time”, so please be gentle, okay? ) |

Comparing the differences between the chat fiction mobile application in the U.S. and Japan, the following aspects would be used for analyzing and comparing.

- Visualizations
- Character personality and background
- Story design

Through this methodology, it would be expected to develop a better understanding of the research question: “What are the differences between U.S. chat fiction and Japanese chat fiction from a gender perspective, and how do gender issues influence the story and character?”

### 4. Case Study: YARN and peep

This research note is still in the process of being analyzed, and further research is needed, however, here are some of the features in the comparison between YARN (the U.S) and peep (Japan). In this research note, the first episode of “Modern Dating” (the U.S) and “Hajimete’ dakara, daiji ni shitene?” (“It’s my first time, so please be gentle, okay?”) (Japan) was chosen to analyze. These stories are listed up as the most popular novels of the love story genre.

#### 4.1 Visualizations

Comparing “Modern Dating” (the U.S.) and “Hajimete’ dakara, daiji ni shitene?” (Japan), the U.S mobile application provide a realistic image and the Japanese mobile application, using more animated characters and having less realistic narratives inspired by game and anime stories.

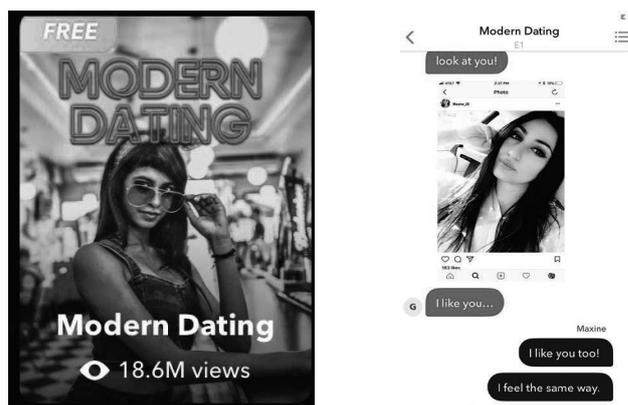


Figure.7 “Modern Dating” (YARN)  
The title image and story scene

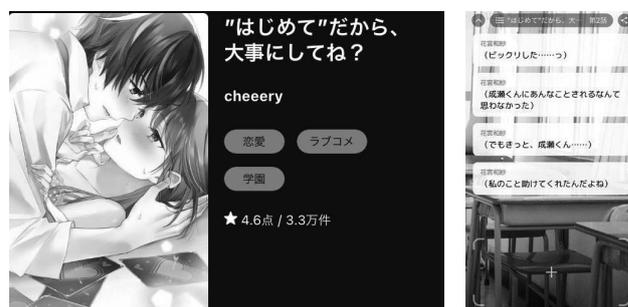


Figure.8 “Hajimete’ dakara, daiji ni shitene?” (peep)  
The title image and story scene

“Hajimete’ dakara, daiji ni shitene?” (Japan), in the story scene, it uses the scenery photo image such as a classroom; however, it uses the animated character for the title scene. This could be predicted that it would be

significantly likely for Japanese people and Japanese culture to implement animated characters for Japanese audiences. As Steinberg (2015) mentioned, in a Japanese society under the influence of media mixes from Kadokawa Media Mix, it is perhaps no longer noteworthy that animated characters are often used (figure7, 8).

#### 4.2 Character Personality and Background

Table 2. Character (YARN and peep)

The main character's personality of "Modern Dating" and "Hajimete' dakara, daiji ni shitene?"

| Title   | Name   | Character & Personality   |
|---|--------|---|
| Modern Dating   | Maxine | She is looking for a new lover after breaking up with her boyfriend. She is an outgoing woman who speaks her mind. She is willing to fight with men sometimes if necessary. |
| "Hajimete' dakara, daiji ni shitene?"("It's my first time, so please be gentle, okay?") | Kazusa | She has had a crush on her classmate for a year, but she is not the type to say she likes him. She is also not able to express her opinion very strongly.                   |

The female characters in the U.S mobile application settings seem to be more diverse concerning their personalities. Also, the stories with romantic elements differ in their portrayal of sexuality: it is rare for Japanese mobile application to have women take the initiative in an intimate relationship, which seems to reflect the social norms that still render women as more passive in a relationship. For instance, Maxine, the protagonists of "Modern Dating" (the U.S) is portrayed as an active and sexually open-minded woman. On the other hand, Kazusa, who is the protagonist of "Hajimete' dakara, daiji ni shitene?" (Japan) is portrayed as a cowardly and shy woman [table 2].

This kind of discriminatory character and story design is commonly used in Japanese manga (Nishiyama, 2016). Thus, it would be considered this is the standard approach to the story, and this tradition seems still useful for chat fiction in Japan.

#### 4.3 Story Design

"Modern Dating" (the U.S) is the protagonist's story, a woman named Maxine, and her struggle to find a partner. In most episodes, she uses an online dating mobile application to meet and date a succession of men. Throughout the whole story, she sometimes enjoys love but is sometimes poorly treated by men.

On the other hand, "Hajimete' dakara, daiji ni shitene?" (Japan), begins when the protagonist, a high school student named Kazusa, suddenly has to pretend to be in love with a male classmate named Haruki whom she has feelings for. Through the entire story, we see how she develops feelings for Haruki, confused and upset by his behaviour.

Comparing the two stories, "Modern Dating" gives the impression that the story is developed through the protagonist's initiative. In contrast "Hajimete' dakara, daiji ni shitene?" (Japan), the protagonist is passive, and the reader might not get much sense of the protagonist's initiative. The protagonists' character and behavior in the two stories also give the impression of being opposite. The story design of "Hajimete' dakara, daiji ni shitene?" (Japan) seems to have the stereotypical problem that Hayakawa (2016) referred to, such as men being strong and independent; women should be kind and caring.

However, stereotypical aspects may also be found in the story of "Modern Dating". For example, the events that happened to her during the story seem to be portrayed to reflect the stereotype of women who use dating mobile applications.

### 5. Discussion and Future Directions

This research note is still a work in progress. However, this study will explore Japanese media, anime and game culture's influence through the differences found in the U.S and Japanese chat fiction mobile application. Although chat fiction, while existing as new literature, can be seen as heavily influenced by transmedia mix. This is a feature that is evident in the Japanese chat fiction mobile application.

There are some noticeable gender aspects between the two mobile applications that would be pointed out; for example, the visual aspect and character design would be a noticeable factor among these mobile applications, although it is still a starting point.

The gender stereotypes that were found through the analysis seem to be linked to the problems and background of gender issues in Japan. As Fujimura and Itoh (2004) explained, media culture seems to have a substantial connection with society, and there would be possibilities

that Japanese gender issues are influencing chat fiction mobile applications.

However, this analysis is still in progress, and has focused on only one story and one genre. Thus, further research is needed. In particular, since both American and Japanese mobile application feature various chat fiction genres, cross-genre analysis is considered particularly important. Also, to make a more in-depth reference to this subject, it is necessary to consider works in other chat fiction mobile application.

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