

‘Simple unchanging stories about things we already know’: Japanese youth and popular songs

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Summary

In Japan’s current transformational times, questions of music audiences intersect closely with issues of youth and social change, suggesting the need to extend the otherwise scant studies of Japanese youth’s music engagements for audience and media studies in general. This article frames new empirical data about popular songs and their interpretations within the social context of contemporary Japan. By combining focus groups, individual interviews and content analysis, I observe that among different tastes and genre particularities, common patterns can be recognized in audience engagements with song lyrics. The first underlines a clear-cut division between the concepts of ‘school’ and ‘work’. The second contrasts the stagnancy in gender stereotypes in lyrics with richness of audiences’ interpretations of the content. The last introduces ‘ordinariness’ as significant in young audience’s perception of songs. All three themes interconnect, presenting Japanese audiences as a potentially insightful subject for further empirical audience studies of popular music.

Keywords: audiences, youth, popular music, modern Japan, song lyrics, focus groups, content analysis.

Introduction and background

This article is part of a wider study (Zaborowski 2010) that focused on Japanese hit song lyrics, and on the ways young audiences engage with them. Through empirical data, it argues that among different ways song lyrics are consumed by young Japanese, some common patterns linking the content of popular songs to their audiences’ lives can be recognized. Three such patterns are introduced in the article. The first underlines a clear-cut division between the concepts of ‘school’ and ‘work’ (or ‘adolescence’ and ‘adulthood’). The second

contrasts the stagnancy in gender stereotypes in Japanese popular song lyrics with richness of audiences' interpretations of the content. The third introduces the concept of 'ordinariness' as significant in young audience's perception of songs. All three themes interconnect, and reveal participants' meaningful engagements with songs in social and national contexts, presenting Japanese audiences as a potentially insightful subject for further empirical audience studies of popular music. On the methodological side, the article demonstrates how interviews and focus groups are helpful in contextualizing audiences' engagements to and in deepening the understanding of content-analysed lyrics.

The question of youth values in Japan constitutes an important, yet understudied issue. The list of topics it connects to ranges from current Japanese job market conditions to the generation gap and societal organization (Mathews 2006). The overlooked youth values and attitudes are linked to current issues such as job turnover or market conditions (Genda 2005:5-6). From this point of view, it becomes interesting to investigate the contrast between youth who have already entered the job market, and those who still have not. The values of young people who find themselves in this transition state between education and work force could be especially insightful in analyzing current societal issues in Japan and elsewhere, including the problem of the underemployed and NEETs ('not in education, employment or training'), issues of job segmentation, or the significance of institutionalized job hunting.

As a result of this substantive mix, different approaches to studying youth values in Japan have been utilized in the past, and many of them shared a presumption that this abstract subject matter requires examination in a specific context.¹ But even though these studies have referenced various youth practices in different areas of popular culture, thus far there has been no extensive research analyzing Japanese audience practices through hit song lyrics.

Bearing in mind this cultural context as well as existing subject literature (e.g., Ackermann 2004, Castells et al 2007), participants in the study come from the group of 18-25 year olds, a cohort dominant in CD purchases and rentals (RIAJ 2007), often regarded as distinct by marketers and scholars of Japan (White 2002:5).² At the same time, studies show that music itself constitutes a big part of these young people's lives. For instance, Japanese in their twenties value popular music significantly more than other forms of entertainment – the money they spend on music purchases surpasses money spent on games by 40 per cent, on movies by 75 per cent and on sports by 300 per cent (Hakuhodo 2003). This trend is consistent with the findings discussed here – asked to rank music among their other activities, the participants placed it above games, movies, exercise, reading or shopping.

Music and audiences

Popular music reception has been studied in the past using a number of methods, and in a variety of paradigms. Much influence on the field came from the original work of the Frankfurt School and Theodore Adorno on the 'culture industry' (Adorno & Horkheimer 1977), and from subsequent critiques of this, introducing notions of popular arts (Hall and

Whannel 1964), subcultures (Hebdige 1979), and the role of the audience. Regarding the last notion, in his classic study Mita introduces music as a medium corresponding with moods and emotions much better than other forms of popular art:

What decisively distinguishes popular songs from the various other popular arts (...) is that the people of the time do not enjoy them in a merely passive manner. For part of what is required to make a popular song popular is that the masses actively participate in it, by singing it to themselves, or singing it out loud, or in unison (Mita 1992:7-8).

Among the ways popular music was studied in the past, content analysis has always been an important approach. Cooper, talking about American music, concluded that the most fruitful perspective for looking at contemporary society through popular music is to 'focus on specific ideas, themes and patterns' prominent in its lyrics (Cooper 1991:5). Frith recollects two of the first pop lyric analysts, Peatman and Mooney, who noted how, under the coating of repetitive love themes, music reflected the changing values and emotions of the audience. Later, song word analyses were used to investigate youth culture, and more specific themes, like attitudes toward sex or marriage (Frith 1988:106-7). Similarly, melodies, performances, and especially song lyrics have been the subject of numerous studies, in which researchers utilized a verbal content analysis to draw conclusions about contemporary societies (Cooper 1991).

Since the early 1980s, audience studies have become the focal point of much of the Cultural Studies approach to social analysis (Longhurst 2007), and the ways music is received by audiences have become the centre of a number of studies (Frith 1988, Freudiger and Almquist 1978, Prinsky and Rosenbaum 1987). The works criticised the earlier, purely textual approaches as lacking objectivity and perspective (Frith 1988), yet their empirical contribution to music reception in everyday contexts remained largely unchanged, as they almost exclusively focused on subcultures and notions of resistance (Hesmondhalgh 2002).

Although much has been written about the complexity of audiences (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998), authors following Hall (1980), Fiske (1986), or Morley (1993) in emphasizing the role and power of the audiences rarely took those insights to the field of music. Music audiences did not enjoy a proliferation of empirical work as literary, television or film studies did in the 1980s and 1990s (to name but a few, Radway 1984, Ang 1985, Buckingham 1987, Schroeder 1988, Livingstone 1990, Livingstone and Lunt 1994, Barker and Brooks 1998, Hill 2002). Subsequently, even though audiences were shown to be permanent, complex and diffused (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), and not passive to the extent that Adorno considered them to be, the question of balance between analyses of texts, audiences, producers and musicians remained (Negus 1996:35). More fruitful for music audience research was the paradigm of everyday life, stemming from the theories of Silverstone (1994) or Hermes (1995). Music reception research fits into these frames, because much of the music listening takes places within the boundaries of everyday

routines (Negus 1996). Such studies showed how music listening in everyday life is most often mundane and woven into simplest activities (Crafts et al. 1993, Feilitzen & Roe 1990, Frith 1996), and, later, how engagements with music interact with and transform those activities (DeNora 2000, Bull 2000)

Meanwhile, research on Japanese popular music audiences has been overall scarce (De Ferranti 2002:198). Ogawa (1988) and Kitagawa (1993) looked at the mediation of music in Japanese society, with an emphasis on the idol genre (Ogawa) and boy bands (Kitagawa), but their approaches were almost exclusively textual and with no empirical account of audiences. The ground-breaking works of Stevens (2007) and Yano (2002), although undoubtedly important, were limited to particular artists avoiding any generalizations (Stevens) or followed in the steps of Mita in heavily relying on the text (Yano). In a similar fashion, Occhi (2000) as well as Oku (1998) studied *enka* and *kayokyoku* genres, Tansman (1996) examined the works of *enka* singer Misora Hibari, Currid (1996) wrote about Japaneseness in the music of composer Sakamoto Ryuichi, Pennycook (2003) investigated the lyrical side of hip-hop's Rip Slime's songs, and Cogan and Cogan (2006) covered some aspects of girl bands in Shonen Knife and Puffy. Particular patterns and motifs appearing in Japanese lyrics have been the subject of many studies, especially by domestic scholars (Akasaka 2003, Azechi 2007). Much work has also been done in the field of rhythm, song structure, mora and other linguistic patterns in Japanese songs (Hamada 2005, Okumura and Arima 1996, Matsuo 1997, Kishimoto 2005). In her study of youth and popular music, Koizumi (2002) concentrated on gender and the different strategies schoolboys and girls use to identify and conceal their music tastes in social and personal sites.

Unfortunately, all of those case studies were, by definition, limited to their specific musical subjects, and only very rarely supplemented the industry paradigm or content analysis with an audience study. While Stevens in her publication on Japanese popular music acknowledged that '[t]he main function of lyrics is to help link sound to emotion', she did not take that point further, and immediately moved on to analyze the use of English words in j-pop (Japanese pop) songs (Stevens 2007:133). Similarly, Kano's study of *kayokyoku* lyrics contained no wider socio-theoretical approaches, but only linguistic and cultural translations of particular traditional Japanese songs (Kano 2004).

The study therefore began from a question of song lyrics on the one hand, and of young music audiences on the other. Assuming, based on pilot studies' results, that there are distinct evaluative themes in contemporary Japanese lyrics, and that lyrics constitute to audiences a significant part of the song experience, I was interested in how the listeners make sense of the lyrical content (or its absence) – how they interpret it, and how they relate it (if at all) to their lives and values.

Method

Methodologically, the study was an attempt to overcome the limits of purely textual or purely ethnographic approaches. It started with a belief that the former loses valuable context in its disregard for music reception, while the latter too often celebrates the fandom

activities without attempting to include the texts in the mix. Thus, this study combined three methods – content analysis, focus groups and individual interviews – to observe patterns of the relation between Japanese youth and hit song lyrics. As described in more detail later, each of the elements added new information to the research data. Content analysis was helpful in assessing the presence and scale of thematic content in Japanese lyrics of the past ten years (at the time of research), but could not tackle the questions of audience engagement. Interviews could, and their two-fold character was an attempt to have participants discuss their experiences in both one-to-one, intimate setting, and a group, interactive setting.

First, 103 popular chart records from the period were selected from a systematically drawn, randomized sample³, and then coded, yielding thirty-nine categories (selected both inductively and deductively)⁴ and based on the occurrence (or absence) of a specific theme. Categories with the highest number of occurrences were grouped in thematic groups and became the basis for the questions guiding the focus group process. To maximize reliability of coding (Krippendorff 2004:214-5), the lyrics were coded in time intervals, twice by the researcher and once by an assistant, with minor inter- or intra-coder differences.

During the two-fold interview stage, I checked the saliency of identified themes with young Japanese, recruited by a number of methods, including advertising, personal recommendations and on-site recruiting (Morgan 1998:86-90). First, a total of twenty-seven Japanese took part in the focus group study (six demographically balanced sessions overall) in two geographically distinct cities, Tokyo and Sendai. The focus group aim was to investigate participants' engagements with song lyrics as well as the salience of the dominant themes identified in the earlier content analysis. Each session was administered by the researcher in Japanese, in a neutral environment, in the presence of a Japanese assistant. During the study, I followed the focus group questioning route outlined by Krueger (1998), Morgan (1993) and Greenbaum (2000). The central part of these sessions were six key theme groups, with themes identified in the content analysis. Among those, three topics that triggered participants' reactions the most became the foci of this article: (1) socialization pressures and graduation, (2) gender roles and depictions and (3) notions of daily life and ordinariness.

A typical focus group session was supported by a standardized questionnaire administered prior to the focus group interview. These questionnaires featured fixed-choice and short open-ended questions about personal data and music choices. This was designed to enable subsequent individual profiling of responses, provide demographic data for comparison, help in establishing a group consciousness, as well as serve as a stimulus material for some parts of the focus group discussions (Krueger 1998:63-70, Barbour 2007:82-90). During the group sessions I adopted the moderator role of an 'enlightened novice' (Krueger 1998a:46), bearing also in mind my hybrid status as a non-Japanese researcher (albeit from a Japanese institution) in Japan. The sessions were followed with an email from the researcher and a feedback request approximately a week after the discussion.

Secondly, I interviewed seven of the focus group participants in individual, in-depth sessions. During these interviews, I compared responses from the group setting to individual responses; I also allowed the respondents to express ideas or comments on topics that were not fully developed during the group sessions. Interviews followed questioning instructions, with a focus on contrast questions, building on the earlier data (Neuman 2003). Typically, respondents were presented with (their own or other participants') quotes from focus sessions and asked to further comment on them. Additionally, interviewees were encouraged to express their free opinions about any of the aspects of the research topic, the focus group dynamics or the overall administration of the discussion study.⁵ All participants appearing in the article have been anonymised.

Young Japanese and music

Although most of the young people interviewed valued melody more than lyrics, they all placed some significance on the lyrical content. The participants attributed various roles to music, and to lyrics in particular, predominantly looking for personal, emotional connections with songs. For many, songs were the source of 'motivation', and inspired them to 'do their best' (*ganbaru*). Some, on the other hand, regarded lyrics purely as art and were driven solely by aesthetic criteria. All these patterns will be described in detail in the next three sections, where I will reveal three findings of the study, supplemented by coding results and quotes illustrating the particular themes.

Songs about graduating and crying

The first major finding was the presence of particular social contexts and situations, such as family, school and work in hit song lyrics. Despite the discovered paucity of political topics (only one in 103 analysed songs), group- and societal implications were abundant for the respondents, and among those, especially visible was the theme of school graduation. Related categories coded during song analysis included, for example, 'family' (coded in nine songs), or 'friendship' (eleven), but the theme of school became really apparent only during the ethnographic portion of the research, as there were no explicit categories for school or work in the code sheet (however, a more general look at Japanese hit songs, confirms the significance of school and graduation).

Discussing tunes about 'doing one's best' (13 songs) or 'motivating others' (18), participants often emphasized how certain song imagery helped them reflect on the change from student to adult life, even though such figures of contrast were not explicit in the lyrics. Kana, a 24 year old female company employee, commented how hearing *Letter*⁶ – a song by Angela Aki – made her reflect on differences between her carefree school life and her present, 'serious' period, which started during her last school year. Kana said: '[I]t all seems so naïve there [in the lyrics]. I recall I was like that, too. And then I think about myself today, serious and all – and I feel like I have lost something important.'

This finding is consistent with other findings in the field, which emphasize the stress

related to the period preceding school graduation (Sugimoto 2003, White 1993:71). Similarly, the notion of the absence of political topics parallels other works on Japanese popular music. Condry (2001) suggested that because of its connection to 'the actual site' and club culture, Japanese rap focuses on the local, rather than on national matters. Ching (1995) in his analysis of Japanese punk noted how the lyrics are predominantly anything hip, trendy and non-political. It is worth noting that the participants themselves were divided on the issue of whether they would like to hear political content in songs or not. Those who did not need politics in hit charts, either had problems with the authenticity of musicians singing message songs, or they regarded music as mostly escapist pleasure.⁷

Many participants voiced that the gap between students and full-time employees (or rather, between student life and life as a company worker) involved a number of pressures, including the necessity to follow rigid social rules and fulfill expectations from above. It was in these juxtapositions that the generation gap in modern Japanese society was mostly voiced. Miho, a 24-year-old female student, commented how young people who during their student years were half-hearted and frivolous, changed immediately after becoming employees; became serious, stiff and responsible, 'just as if they turned into different people.' Saki (female, 23 years old, office worker), referred here to the bitter-sweet songs about *sakura* (Japanese cherry): '[the graduation and subsequent employment] is sad, but also full of hope. Just like in *sakura* songs: the petals fall and it's time to say goodbye, there's hope for good things happening as well.'

However, more than internal pressures, respondents emphasized the wider, social aspect of graduation. A participant reflected how especially in Spring, with the end of the academic year, graduation-themed songs are especially popular, as '[t]hey all go together – the falling *sakura* petals, the lyrics, the painful partings and the hopes for a new and successful future.' Prompted by this comment, other respondents in the group commented about their (perceived) national identities as well:

Moe (female, 24, part-time employee): 'It's all mixed up, the joy of starting something new and the sadness of parting with everyone, it's all mixed, most often, isn't it?'

Shiori (female, 23, student): 'That's so Japanese, right? Mixed, ambiguous emotions.'

Another respondent, asked about a song best describing her graduation, referred to a similar duality of emotions in Moriyama Naotaro's hit *Sakura*: 'He says not to cry, because although it's time to go and it's sad, it's all good, because we'll meet again'. The fragment in question is:

Don't cry, my friend/
Sadly, it's time to go/

With that simple smile
(...)
Farewell, my friend/
Let's meet again, here
On this cherry blossom-scattered street
(Moriyama Naotaro, *Sakura*, Universal Music Japan 2003)⁸

Notions of societal pressures and their implications are widely described in existing literature about Japanese youth. The difference between some of those findings, referenced below, and this study is that the respondents did not contest these pressures nor the societal norms forced on them as much as was apparent in previous research. The active 'warding off' the norms of the adult world, present in Ackermann's (2004) study, was hardly visible in my sessions: the participants expressed irony and mild pessimism, but they were far from the resistance or escapism described by Ackermann. This was clear in the example of Jun, a 19 year old male student. Jun, explaining the process of job hunting, mentioned the pressures young people suffer from ('everybody looks for a job, so you look as well') and laughingly concluded that in the end, 'it's as if I was abducted and made an employee, with my world and freedom taken away (...) and there is nothing I can do about it'.

Young company workers in the study were also less pessimistic in their views than respondents of a similar age group analyzed by Mathews (2006) in his research, and far less antagonistic towards the notion of generation gap than some of college students in McVeigh's study (2004). While McVeigh's subjects expressed a variety of reactions towards notions of 'youth' and 'adults', they associated themselves clearly with the former. In my research, perhaps because of a slightly older study population including young graduates, participants often identified themselves with the adult world. For instance, asked about cultural differences between young people and adults, a typical respondent would automatically position themselves within the latter category, and begin to list things they do not understand in today's middle- or high-school kids' culture.

As examples of that gap, participants would often raise music choices. Describing her music collection, Chinatsu, a 21 year old female student, stated even that 'there is far wider gap between me and my 16-year-old sister than there is between me and people in their 30s or 40s.' Similarly, there were many respondents reluctant to admit cultural aspects dividing them from people in their thirties or forties; they rather emphasized the generation gap between themselves and high school students.

Ultimately, although ironic and pessimistic, the respondents (students and full-time employees alike) were rather calm about the inevitable changes happening on the verge of school graduation. For the above participants, songs containing this transitional imagery seemed, if anything, to help (re)integrate them into society and 'soften the blow' of adult life. Carefree songs had the memories of the past to hold on to, while songs about 'doing one's best' were a taste of life after graduation. The change was interpreted as inevitable, yet not hopeless; a challenge more than a conviction.

Although this study did not intend to paint a representative portrait of this age group, a further, comprehensive study might pursue this topic and ask whether this cohort is substantially a completely different societal segment than slightly younger subjects of other, mentioned earlier, studies of youth. Such study could also compare the findings to a vast body of Western scholarly work on youth in transition, on the adolescence and adulthood.

One of the topics I give short attention in the article is the meaning and implications of the word 'youth'. Ackermann (2004) notes that the Japanese word for young people (*wakamono*) is ambiguous and may refer to different cohorts. In song lyrics, although identifiers of youth are present, there are ambiguities in their diversity – besides *wakai* ('young') and *wakamono* ('youth'), there is *seishun* ('youth', literally 'spring') as well as more obscure *genki* – 'vigor' or 'energy'. Thoughts on youth(ful) images were exchanged by participants in all focus sessions, and a particularly interesting aspect of these discussions was how the respondents regarded themselves in the context of 'youth'. Namely, for various reasons (such as age, high school graduation, affiliation with 'the adult world' via work or job hunting) most participants clearly distanced themselves from the category of youth. It could be illuminating to research the forces behind such reasoning in this age group, as well as the social implications of these choices, not only in Japan.

Songs about waiting

The second finding from the study concerns gender roles. Although the coding process was limited to simple categories and did not include detailed gender portrayals, it has alerted the researcher to two main kind of female presence in the lyrics. On the one hand, there was the shy admiring female, like in Petitmoni's *Chokotto Love*⁹ ('I changed my hairstyle/ Just a little bit / But I so want you to notice it'), on the other – there was (much more rare) active female imagery, such as in Ai's *Story*, where the singer exclaims strongly: 'I will protect you'¹⁰. It has been observed that although some strong female roles are present in popular lyrics, the overall feeling was of the gender division overall still clearly set, with the male (more often than not) active and female – passive and immobile.

An example of this notion is Aoyama Thelma's song *Soba Ni Iru Ne*¹¹ ('I'm Here Beside You'). The main motif of its lyrics is a lonely woman patiently waiting for her (probably separated by distance) man's expression of love. Although participants were asked to react to the lyrics during the session, in three focus groups the topic of *Soba Ni Iru Ne* came up before that, specifically mentioned by the participants. Commenting on the song and on other examples of female passiveness in hit song lyrics, most female respondents reacted with disdain. A representative reaction towards the female in the song was expressed by Chinatsu, who exclaimed 'just go [to him] already, idiot!' Male participants often described the female role in the song not as passive, but rather 'traditional', as exemplified by Ryoichi (male, 25):

Instead of portraying it frank, in the Japanese mind, men and women have their specific ways, in songs they're 'just saying it', not meaning it really, it's more

about masculinity and femininity, I think. I guess depending on one's perspective, it might be seen as some kind of inequality, but here that's natural. Traditional.

Soba Ni Iru Ne is interesting, because it is a duet: there are male rap verses in between Aoyama Thelma's choruses. The male protagonist seems similarly inactive, but he has significant potential for action:

... All that aside, are you well? Eating properly?/
Shit, can't say it in the end/
I will send it next time [in] my letter/

Unmistakably, he is the one to send letters or care about the female's everyday well-being. The difference in power is most brutally evident in the first verse, where he interrupts her chorus with '...All that aside.' The subject of male roles in lyrics attracted overall less attention from the participants, but some, especially female respondents, emphasized the changes in male images as well. One of the participants, referring to both her and her friends' experiences, commented that recently (Japanese) men 'lack confidence', which is apparent in song lyrics as well. Interestingly, the comment was made about the middle verse in above fragment, which for the (female) participant signaled a lack of masculinity or 'guts'.

Gender stereotypes of an active male and a passive female are obviously not limited to Japan. What is interesting in the Japanese case is the way the activeness and passiveness are interpreted across time. The passive female in contemporary lyrics was, in each focus group session, compared by participants to females in older Japanese songs, especially in the *enka* genre. While three participants stated that the portrayals haven't substantially changed over the years, twice as many argued that females are more active in today's lyrics. Their arguments can be summed up in the following exchange between two full-time company employees, Kana (female, 24) and Shiori (female, 23).

Kana: 'In *enka* the woman would always wait, and be sad. She would always be the subject of some tragedies, being cheated on. Now, I feel [women] have more active appeal in songs.'

Shiori: 'Like, a woman is charging forward.'

Kana: '[Singing] "I love you I love you I love you."'

The woman seems thus to be 'charging' by openly confessing her love; instead of waiting silently (like in traditional *enka* songs), she is waiting with an explicit love song on her lips. She does not *have* to wait, as she would in the past, but she *chooses* to. This echoes Gill's slightly different argument of images of postfeminism, where women are not directly objectified, but 'choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner' (Gill 2007:151).

Just like similar studies in the West, previous research has shown that in Japanese culture and its popular representations, gender is clearly constructed and its attributes are strongly set (Suzuki 1995). White (1993) mentioned different standards and expectations towards education for boys and girls - the latter sometimes find university degree to be an obstacle in the process of finding a spouse. Holden (2000) in his analysis of television concluded that in Japanese commercials gender (and sexuality) is a coherent and monolithic narrative. Different authors have found rigid gender stereotyping in *manga* (Allison 2000) or *anime* (Izawa 2000).

It is often stressed how gender plays a key role in Japanese popular music (Cogan and Cogan 2006:73; Aoyagi 2005:152). Describing this notion, scholars often refer to particular examples of (mostly female) artists and the messages they send to their audience through the songs, visual images as well as fan communications. An example of such a study is Cogan and Cogan's analysis of a female duo band Puffy, and its male producer – Okuda Tamio. Cogan and Cogan argued that by including quotes or references to foreign songs, the producer is blurring the line between male and female. At the same time, the scholars noted that the (little, but nevertheless present) contribution of the female singers toward some parts of lyrics and music, helped link with the audience by presenting a model for Japanese women (Cogan and Cogan 2006:85-6). Stanlaw (2000) similarly argued that women are no longer bound by the whims of male songwriters or publicity handlers, and many are going off in new musical directions of their own. He stressed that woman pop vocalists are offering new ways of viewing the relationships between men and women, and in their songs are providing new, alternative models of how women can view themselves and behave (Stanlaw 2000:75-6).

There are a number of problems with the literature reviewed above. First of all, the examples given to support the claims are, unfortunately, heavily outdated. Most of the performers listed – among others: Princess Princess, Judy and Mary, Matsuda Seiko, Matsutoya Yumi – are no longer active on the music scene, and there is no comprehensive data on the new generations of singers. Secondly, the studies concentrated heavily on the use of English in songs (and the change in gender portrayals this caused), as if to suggest that the Japanese parts of lyrics have not changed at all. Thirdly, the studies described particular artists, and nothing was said about general trends of gender roles in popular lyrics.¹²

Contrasting with these stories is also the reality of song lyrics. A number of studies suggest that gender models and stereotypes do change, and the range of gender identities in Japan is steadily increasing (White 2002, Castro-Vazquez 2007). However, even in the relatively small sample of this study, the range of new gender identities in lyrics seemed comparably smaller than the ones reported in *manga* (Kinsella 2000), *anime* (Napier 2001) or television (Suzuki 1995), which may suggest that, of all these media, popular music might be the furthest to the conservative side. In analysed contemporary hit songs, there was no variety in female gender roles like in *anime*, where the characters range from shy girls in romantic comedies, through strong female warriors, to ironically portrayed gender-confused protagonists (Napier 2001). Although Stanlaw (2000) as well and Cogan and Cogan (2006) do

show examples of new types of female identities in Japanese popular music, their study cases do not seem to reflect in the analysed songs, where gender roles seemed still stale and traditional.

Most of my participants, however, did voice their experiences of a shift in gender stereotypes in music, stating that there are songs with females 'different than the ones in songs their parents listened to'. For instance, as Natsuki, a 21-year-old female respondent noted, the woman would sometimes be portrayed as 'leading'; there are also more straight and active expressions of love by the woman. The issue of coding calibration between methods can account for part of this discrepancy, but mostly it was the deeper contextualization of the interview discussion that allowed for this finding.

Songs about things you already know

The third motif unearthed by the study was ordinariness (26 songs), expressed by the emphasis on daily objects and everyday situations in lyrics (for instance, park benches, railway stations, ordering pizza).¹³ The participants almost unanimously identified this theme as significant to their experience of consuming lyrics. Although sometimes definitions of 'ordinary' varied among participants, respondents were usually vocal about the theme before it had been brought up by the researcher.

One of the features of Japanese popular culture often developed by scholars is the relatively close distance between producers and audiences. This is usually achieved by descriptions of daily social situations and appearances of concrete objects/places. Condry in his study of Japanese hip-hop notes how this music genre in Japan possesses a range of unique features: the lack of misogyny, violence or drugs, and on the other hand, a strong imagery of social situations and daily life (Condry 2001:223). Yano, in a somewhat parallel (but perhaps not equal) notion, describes portrayals of hometown or motherly love in enka 'wonderfully simple, direct and untarnished', when contrasted with 'the tumult and complexity of today's Japan' facing challenges of economic recession, natural disasters and globalization (Yano 2000:60).

In the case of Japanese pop music scene, Aoyagi (2000) noted that while *stars* in the West possess superb personal uniqueness, Japanese *idols* are much closer to ordinary people (Aoyagi 2005). Although there is much scholarship on stardom and ordinariness in the West (Stacey 1994, Hayward 1996 – to name but two), and more recent phenomena of reality television bring those discussions back, on the whole, there is a narrative of excess and distance when describing Western stars. On the other hand, striking in Japan is the link between the performer and the fan, where the former, even when surpassing the latter in terms of his primary entertainment skills (in case of music – singing or playing an instrument), does (or seems to do) this only *just*, as if not to intimidate or alienate the audience by a large gap.¹⁴ In a similar fashion, Morton (2003) explored Japanese television, Chiba (2003) briefly analysed the world of manga, and Treat (1996) described modern Japanese novels; all observing the same "normalcy": the artist adopts the ordinary in an

effort to create proximity to the fans. The gap between the performer and audience is challenged by that 'normal' attitude. Painter called it a 'quasi-intimate interaction between those on the screen and those who watch at home', to describe feelings that producers try to promote in the audience towards the show (Painter 1996). Similarly, Yoshimoto presented a similar view, noting how Japanese television 'has the unique quality of eliminating the distance between the self and other' (Morton 2003:216).

In his work on infotainment, Holden argued that this proximity ('intimacy') achieved by the content and the form plays into the contrast between the traditional Japanese concepts of outside (*soto*) and inside (*uchi*). By inviting the audience 'inside', the medium serves a purpose of 'defining (national, ethnic, gender, age etc.) groups, often by juxtaposition' (Holden 2004:1213). Intimacy is then engineered, to 'forge the collective *uchi*' (Holden and Ergul 2006:106). In a similar fashion Takahashi (2010) mentioned the concept, noting how media and ICT create and remake different modern *uchi*: national, domestic or professional. In her adapted and complex notion of *uchi/soto*, Takahashi claims that engagement with media results in new forms of self-creation by Japanese audience (Takahashi 2010:129-141, 162-164).

Scholars such as Nakamori used the same notion to describe the whole music industry in Japan. She noted how in the 1980s the media push for new artists was not one that demanded talent or ability. Instead, it was precisely the absence of talent and ability that mattered. That way, communication between artists and audience was made possible (Nakamori 1991). Stanlaw briefly described the amateur nature of female stars in the Japanese music industry and the difficult journey they must go through in their careers (Stanlaw 2000:77-8). He explained that this long public exposure creates a bond between girls in front of the TV screen and girls inside – or between artist and consumer. This is hardly limited to the female side of Japanese pop. Brasor and Tsubuku noted that members of highly successful music groups from Johnny's Jr. stable are not exactly good singers either (Brasor and Tsubuku 1997:55-65). The performers are not special – they are made special by their public exposure, precisely because they were not unique at first, and the mediated aspect of their lives from early childhood creates a close and personal experience with the audience (Painter 1996:214).

Aoyagi related to this, calling Japanese entertainment stars 'life-sized' (*toshindai*), which bears similarities with Ogawa's (1988) notion of 'quasi-friends' (Aoyagi 2000:311). The process, he explained, creates a virtual sense of intimacy with the performers (Holden's 'quasi-intimacy'), enforced further by numerous events linking to the audience: handshaking meetings, get-togethers or public photo-shoots (Aoyagi 2000:312). These concepts, often emphasized by foreign authors, are sometimes present in Japanese scholarship as well. In his study about consumerism, Clammer describes Japan as a culture where the *quotidian* – the mundane and the everyday – 'is elevated to an art form and seen as constituting the core of life rather than as detracting from it' (Clammer 1997).

My data show that participants consumed the 'ordinariness' in songs in two ways – to achieve a deeper identification with (or even transposition to) the song, and to rediscover

the markers of their national identity.¹⁵ Through various processes, the young audience seems to utilize these concepts for both self-creation and unique meaning interpretation.

A major group of respondents found ordinariness essential in enabling the emotional connection to lyrics. A representative quote here might be one by Kenta, a 23-year-old male student, who stated that ‘ordinary songs are easier to identify with, and this makes you like the song more’. Furthermore, it was observed that the participants used (or declared the use of) the familiar imagery for two main purposes: to transpose themselves into the song’s message or to refer to their national identities. The first trend was represented by participants like Miho (24-year-old graduate student) who confessed to the practice of ‘forcibly’ applying messages of song lyrics to her own situation and context. In a similar exchange below, two participants raised the issue of context:

Haruka (female, 18, student): ‘There are those Kobukuro’s lyrics, where [a couple] goes to a supermarket and, [he says] “I will hold one side [of the bag] for you...”’

Asuka (female, 23, student): ‘Yes, instead of abstract things, the presence of concrete things makes it easier to invest emotions in the song (...) But on the other hand, if you had an experience of something similar to that concrete situation in lyrics, you might feel different about it, there might be some antipathy. (...) For example, where there’s “I will hold one side” in the lyrics, well, I’d say “hold the whole thing instead!”’

The second notion refers to respondents who often and willingly referred to the markers of Japanese ethnicity while discussing ordinariness in songs. Kenta (male, 23, student) commented that ‘this ordinariness is what reveals the Japanese national character.’ Other participants stated that the references to familiar imagery in songs make them feel secure and cosy – ‘at home’, as opposed to being ‘outside’. In other words, they utilized familiar aspects of their daily life, depicted in lyrics, to differentiate between their national *uchi* (in) and *soto* (out).

Lastly, it should be noted that the participants often disregarded the general message of a song in favor of particular (familiar) words and phrases. To borrow the wording from Jenkins (among others), they ‘poached’ elements of the content to create a unique meaning (Jenkins 1992, 2006). In other words, the process was not unilateral, as the audience consumed the lyrics *actively* – by consuming only chosen parts of the product. This trend is expressed by a quote from Jun, a 19-year-old male student, who suggested that in songs about Japanese cherry (*sakura*) the audience is not interested in a story, but in the very images of *sakura*:

[If there were a song] about how *sakura* in Kyoto are pretty, it probably wouldn’t get too popular. The point is, [the *sakura* image in lyrics] connects to

your own song, your personal *sakura* ... links lyrics to your memories, and that makes it easy to relate with [the song] ...

Another participant admitted to sometimes disregarding the overall message of songs to concentrate on particular imagery of the lyrics, like those of a railway station. More than conveying a story, these images helped her reconnect with her memories of school days, or even beautify them. In other words, these participants actively consume the content, creating unique interpretations of the lyrics.

Conclusion

Overall, although recent media studies stress the significance of new ways of interaction between young people (Ito et al 2006, Mathews 2006), the data confirms that music – a traditional medium – still remains important to Japanese youth. Interestingly, most participants alienated themselves from a target audience (often undefined) for contemporary Japanese hit songs. Although market data suggests otherwise, my participants considered themselves above the age segment consuming the most music today. Their answers to my questions about their representations or identity in songs suggest that, although they are well informed and conscious about modern trends in music, they clearly distance themselves from its content.

This study employed content analysis and interviews side-by-side, in order to deepen the understanding of young Japanese people's engagements with song lyrics. This approach, although small in scale and hardly comprehensive, was successful in capturing data which would be difficult to acquire using only one of the methods. The salience of the graduation theme, for instance, would not be as visible without the ethnographic portion, while the poaching aspect of lyrics' use was brought forth by the textual analysis beforehand.

In this article, I identified three main research findings. First, societal contexts of transition between youth and adult life were significantly present in the analysed songs. Most participants, young students and workers, read those contexts as natural reminders of rites of passage from school to work – a rite they have already passed. Second, although female and male participants varied in their reactions to portrayals of passive females in lyrics, both groups more often than not agreed that current Japanese music offers a wider range of female portrayals than before. This goes against the textual analysis results, and the minority of participants' comments, which noted how issues of gender are the same as they were in traditional *enka* genre songs - passive women, active men. Third, the theme of ordinariness, prominent in contemporary lyrics, constituted an important part of song-listening experience to virtually all participants. They reported the use of these ordinary images for emotional connections, as well as for emphasis of their national (and traditional) identities.

Still, the study of mainstream Japanese popular music (and song lyrics in particular) and their audiences remains largely untouched. Despite classic musicologist scholarship, numerous studies of musical texts, despite music industry research, and some audience

studies – we still don't know how to study musics and their listeners in a more wholesome way. From this study it is clear, I hope, that content analysis and interviews have much to offer to music audience analysis, and a comprehensive framework able to effectively include them both is needed. Even more pressing is, however, a need for large-scale ethnographic studies of music audiences, and for a conceptual framework which will go beyond lyrics, and will place the complex experiences of music-listening in the frame of everyday life – just like film or television studies were able to do in previous decades.

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Notes:

¹ Examples include, but are not limited to, mobile media cultures (Ito et al 2006), sexual education (Castro-Vazquez 2007), hip-hop subculture (Condry 2001), education system (McVeigh 2006), manga (Kinsella 2000), family life (White 2002) and Japanese cinema (Iles 2008).

² There were two other reasons behind the age choice. Methodologically, the cohort seemed more coherent and dynamic in focus group discussions than young people aged 20-29. Culturally, I was interested in institutional aspects of young people's lives, and thus it was important to observe the participants in the transition periods between high school and university or work (the importance of these institution in Japan was raised by, among others, Sugimoto 2003 or White 2002).

³ The song sample was composed of twenty songs each from three, randomly chosen, yearly Oricon (popular record ranking in Japan) charts (top 100 songs each) and 43 overall most popular songs from the period. The 43 most popular songs were identified by an original, three-step method, constructed in order to include the characteristics of different song rankings, which alone were not sufficient for the study.

⁴ During content analysis, the researcher supplemented his initial categories with ones arising from the data during the analysis. For instance, while motifs of love or future were visible in the sample, some anticipated issues, such as politics, guilt or deviancy were practically invisible.

⁵ In Japan, there is little tradition of using focus groups for social sciences. Although there have been studies such as Oka's work about self-help groups (Oka 2003:108-9), the scarcity of similar research may pose a question whether the Japanese possess the character or experiential comfort to provide unbiased, fully free opinions in a group setting. My data showed no clear evidence that they do not. To maximize the expression of full, unbiased opinion by the participants I used a variety of methods. One of them was having groups with a similar age range, which was to lessen possible hierarchical obstacles in the discussion. The participants did not reveal their names, age, education or profession to other participants, and everyone called each other by their first names or nicknames. The sessions were lively, with all participants actively contributing to the discussions. Moreover, the validity of opinions shown in the group setting was successfully checked with a follow-up questionnaire, as well as by individual interviews with chosen participants.

⁶ Angela Aki, *Tegami (Haikai Jugo no Kimi e)*, Sony Music Japan, 2009.

⁷ Although this is not the focus of this paper, the tension between the notion of musical escapism, and emotional connection through music is interesting.

⁸ All lyrics in the study were translated by the researcher.

⁹ Petitmoni, *Chokotto Love*, Zetima 1999.

¹⁰ In *Story*, the first chorus reads:

Because I'm not alone /
Because you will protect me/

But in the second and third chorus the roles are reversed:

Because you're not alone /
Because I will protect you/

(Ai, *Story*, Universal Music, 2005)

¹¹ Aoyama Thelma, *Soba Ni Iru Ne*, Universal, 2008.

¹² A content analysis of *enka* songs conducted by Yano was the closest to a general study, although it too was only partial, and focused on one genre. (Yano 2002: 93-103).

¹³ Absent from this article is a closer comparison to a large body of theoretical work outside Japan, concerning (among other notions) the quotidian, the everyday and the ordinary. Although such attempts are ultimately important, they were not the foci of this article.

¹⁴ See Aoyagi, 2005:67. Also in Herd 1984.

¹⁵ This is not to suggest the presence of such markers is unique to Japan. Michael Skey's recent (2011) monograph on national belonging, for example, is a comprehensive account of, among other things, national markers of identity in the UK.