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Male and Female Interactions: A Multimodal Analysis of Shonen Manga

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While comics had their first emergence in American popular media in the 19th century, manga, the Japanese version of comic books, has been around since the 18th century (Johnson-Woods, 2010; Van Lente, 2012). Manga first appeared in the United States in the 1970s and has remained a permanent fixture in American literature, with specific titles such as *Fruits Basket* (2004) becoming an American best-seller upon its introduction (Johnson-Woods, 2010). This medium's growth and global impact have become apparent as manga has become a popular literary mode for students (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006). People can find manga in local bookstores, public libraries, and school libraries.

Manga is an example of popular media. These Japanese comics are read from right to left and have genres that target gendered audiences, such as shonen (boys' manga), shojo (girls' manga), seinen (men's manga), and josei (women's manga) (Johnson-Woods, 2012). Manga and comics have a reputation for portraying females in sexualized and traditionally female-dominated roles such as being a mother, homemaker, or victim (Beerman, 2012; Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Saito, 2011; Tuchman, 2000). Students are a gendered audience who read manga and are being shown content which is meant to appeal to them. Researchers should study representations in manga genres that target specific genders as they may show unequal portrayals for different audiences.

This article presents findings from an ongoing project examining representations of gender and gender roles in popular manga. While the larger study examines representations of gender roles in male and female interactions within popular manga, the study shared here focused on shonen manga, in particular. The shonen genre dominates manga sales on Amazon, a large online retailer and has content which is meant to appeal to boys.

The following questions guide this study:

- What are gender roles present within the interactions between male and female characters in popular shonen manga published by Viz Media?
- How are those roles represented in the visuals and text?

In this paper, I share an analytical tool that helped me investigate and understand representations of males and females in shonen manga. I then explain how I analyzed the words and images across ten shonen manga texts. My findings show that traditional gender norms are still present in manga, but that some texts do break stereotypes. I also include lesson ideas designed to support teachers in studying representations of gender in manga texts.

If teachers want to use manga within the classroom, they should be aware of what they contain. Students of any gender can read manga

despite their target audiences. Because gendered genres categorize manga, it is critical to consider the gender representations within them.

Literature Review

Research on gender representations in manga is limited. While researchers have examined interpersonal relationships and the amount that characters speak (Unser-Schutz, 2015) and how gender and sexuality are performed between shojo versus seinen genres (Darlington & Cooper, 2010), I was unable to find any studies that specifically examined representations of gender roles in male and female interactions within the shonen genre.

Males and females are not portrayed the same way in the comics medium. Both manga and comics objectify and sexualize females and use the male gaze to portray females (Cocca, 2014; Klein, 1999; Madeley, 2012; Ogi, 2003; Robbins, 2014). Writers represent female bodies to fit the societal ideal of being hourglass figured and less muscled than males (Cocca, 2014; Medeley, 2012). Additionally, writers pose them in ways that bring more attention to the breasts and butt. When analyzing females in comics, Cocca (2014) noted that 16.55% of their poses were with an arched back, 1.78% were broke back (i.e., an unnaturally flexibly posed), and 6.85% were egregious (i.e., unbelievably and unrealistically posed). These visual representations continue to portray females in stereotypical ways.

Some studies have shown little difference in female/male representations and actions within manga (Ekachai & Drout, 1996; Tsurumi, 1997). For example, while analyzing a single manga, Tsurumi (1997) found that there is not always a clearly defined message about gender roles and that manga does not necessarily reflect societal standards. Also, in a study measuring interactions of male and female characters, it was shown that actions between males and females were close in number for acts such as enacting touch with each

other (Ekachai & Drought, 1996). However, the depiction of females compared to males in scenarios of childcare and the home followed the traditional pattern of "good wife and wise mother" (Ekachai & Drought, 1996). There was still gender inequality despite near equal distributions of certain actions between them.

Theoretical Framework

I draw from social semiotic views of multimodality and gender and feminist theories to frame this study. Hines and Appleman (2000) note that theoretical lenses of interpretation provide new ways of reading texts and can help students understand their relationship with classroom and real-world contexts. Multimodality and social semiotics can be used to give students an enhanced understanding of various literary forms they encounter within and beyond the classroom.

Social Semiotics and Multimodality

Today, society uses a range of media to communicate. It is increasingly vital to understand how people interpret the modes (i.e., communicative channels such as text, picture, or sound) used in different types of media. Readers interpret multiple modes simultaneously, and each different mode offers opportunities for possible meaning (Jewitt, 2009). Recognizing how text and pictures interact is essential for acquiring and interpreting information (Gee, 1998; Sipe, 1998). Two modes present in traditional print comics and manga are image and written language. This means that manga is a multimodal text genre. The pictures and text within manga convey their own separate meaning but can work together to create new meaning.

Sipe (1998) defined some different relationships that can occur between the image and text. Concurring or congruent relationships demonstrate when text and pictures represent similar meanings. Complimentary or relaying

Male and Female Interactions

relationships occur when text and pictures have separate meanings but work together in non-contentious ways. Counterpoint or deviation is when the text and picture have opposite meanings. Sometimes words and pictures align to communicate similar information, and other times they offer counterpointing viewpoints that can contradict one another (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000).

Gender and Feminist Theories

This study aligns with gender and feminist theories, which recognize that there are stereotypes present in media culture (Tuchman, 2000). According to Butler (2011), gender is performative in every culture (i.e., people have their own unique ways of expressing their gender), and there are modes through which people perform gender (i.e., fashion, language, symbols) (Butler, 2011). However, what an individual intends to perform in terms of gender may differ from how others interpret or perceive them (Butler, 2011; Goffman, 1979). Goffman (1979) noted that the gender identities portrayed in a society tell a person what their expectations are within that society. Stereotypes exist in which females are marginalized, victimized, objectified, as well as considered homemakers or inferior to males (Butler, 2011; Gerbner, 1972; Tuchman, 2000).

In this study, gender is considered from a binary perspective. The concept of gender as a binary of female and male is a social construction (Butler, 2011). Therefore, gender is not biological but rather something made up or created by society. Butler (2011) stated that in any society, gender is not always consistent or coherent. Gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, sex, and region which suggests culture impacts/influences gender and vice versa. Diprose (1991) emphasized this idea by noting that the body is a material and a mode of expression. When society labels someone with a specific gender, there are cultural implications for that gender. Gender is often associated with specific

stereotypes which are frequently accepted and perpetuated in the dominant culture (Butler, 2011).

Cultural stereotypes and bias also affect the way that people interpret gender representations in media. While interacting with comics or manga, students can see differences in the way females and males are portrayed and continue to perpetuate and confirm these stereotypes through discussion (Cook & Frey, 2017; Mofatt & Norton, 2008; Silva, 2018). In a study of student interpretations of *Archie* comics, Mofatt & Norton (2008) found that students assumed heteronormative (i.e., heterosexuality being the default) relationships between characters. Further, students would often take the male characters' side in arguments or adopt a more patriarchal view. In a classroom study exploring comics, Cook and Frey (2017) found that students could visually analyze comics, form opinions, and discuss social issues within the comics, including sexism. Students questioned pictures and formed conclusions based on color, body image, language, and dress of characters. Therefore, it is vital to consider and analyze gender representations in popular media within the classroom.

Methods

In this study, I used a qualitative multimodal content analysis approach. Qualitative multimodal content combines qualitative content analysis with theories of social semiotics and visual culture to better understand the meaning potentials of multimodal texts. Qualitative content analysis allows for the methodical coding and identification of themes around visual, textual, and linguistic data through the researcher's interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Furthermore, it helps researchers determine the differences in representation across individual and multiple modes (Serafini & Reid, 2019).

Data Corpus

For this study, I gathered a data corpus of ten manga from Amazon's manga best sellers list. This list included the most popular-selling manga on the website which is created based on recent and historical sales (*Amazon Best Sellers Rank*, 2021). Amazon is a reliable source to gauge the popularity of manga because it is accessible and used by many United States citizens. As of June 2019, there are 105 million subscribers in the US ("Amazon Statistics and Facts", 2020). Additionally, Amazon is a more popular online marketplace than its competitors (Mohsin, 2021). The top 10 manga on the list can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Manga in Order of Popularity

| | |
|----|---|
| 1 | <i>My Hero Academia</i> (2016) |
| 2 | <i>One Punch Man</i> (2014) |
| 3 | <i>Demon Slayer</i> (2018) |
| 4 | <i>The Way of the House Husband</i> (2018) |
| 5 | <i>Dr. Stone</i> (2017) |
| 6 | <i>Dragon Ball Super</i> (2017) |
| 7 | <i>Black Clover</i> (2015) |
| 8 | <i>Boruto: Naruto Next Generations</i> (2017) |
| 9 | <i>One Piece</i> (2003) |
| 10 | <i>Hunter x Hunter</i> (1998) |

Originally, my intent behind this study was to examine representations of gender roles in male and female interactions in popular manga. However, the ten most popular manga were of the same genre, shonen, which targets young boys as its audience. As such, the findings of this study are relevant to the shonen genre and not other manga genres (e.g., seinen, shojo, or josei). Also, all the manga were published by the same company, Viz Media. This company is "at the forefront of America's Japanese pop-culture phenomenon" and reaches "one in four millennials and half of all GenZ manga readers" (VIZ, n.d.). This sample, while not diverse in genre or publisher, still provides

important information about gender representations in popular manga because these texts are the most popular and frequently bought manga by Amazon users in the United States. I excluded manga that did not have text and pictures on each page (such as novels that had few images throughout). In the case of manga titles that were not the first volume in the series, I used the first volume to ensure I understood the characters' context.

Within each manga in the data corpus, I selected specific sequences as units of analysis. These units of analysis varied in length and included all sequences when a male and female interacted directly, either verbally or physically, and did not include thoughts about another character. I chose to analyze sequences of interaction to evaluate how roles differ while males and females are aware of each other and can affect each other's actions.

Within the data corpus, characters imagined interactions. For example, one male character imagined that a female character was naked in *Dr. Stone* (2017), and in *My Hero Academia* (2016), another male character thought of a female character as being "cute in that uniform". I did not count these interactions between the characters because it was not an actual verbal or physical interaction between characters. I examined manga from beginning to end to determine which sequences would be analyzed. Due to word count limitations, a complete description of selected texts, codes, definitions, and parameters for the study are not included here.

Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis process, I read through each manga and wrote analytical memos or notes (Erickson, 1986). I used these notes to record observations about role representations. As

Male and Female Interactions

shown in Appendix A, I then created an analytical tool or template that enabled me to systematically consider the visual and verbal elements and document representations of gender. I described interactions between characters in the first column. I analyzed the relationship between the picture and the text in a second column (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Sipe, 1998). I used the final column to record the role(s) characters took on in the sequence. When identifying these roles, I drew from gender and feminist theories (Bloom, 2017; Butler, 2011; Goffman, 1979; Mager & Helgeson 2011; Murphey, 2016; Ekachai & Drout, 1996). See Table 2 for a list of these roles. After completing the analysis, I highlighted various patterns noted within the tool and then organized these patterns into themes.

Table 2*Roles and Counts*

| Role | Definition | Female | Male | Totals |
|--------------------|--|--------|------|--------|
| Hero | Character saves damsel in distress | 6 | 18 | 24 |
| Damsel in Distress | Character is saved | 18 | 6 | 24 |
| Assailant | Character initiates aggression | 24 | 23 | 47 |
| Victim | Character is the target of aggression | 23 | 24 | 47 |
| Caregiver | Character cares for another character | 8 | 3 | 11 |
| Receiver | Character receives care | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| Homemaker | Character engages in housework | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Provider | Character earns money or works for the household | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Objectifier | Character objectifies another character sexually | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Object of Desire | Character is sexually objectified | 4 | 1 | 5 |

Findings**Traditional Gender Norms**

Traditional gender norms dominated the interactions between males and females in the data corpus. Writers represented female characters as damsels in distress (18), caregivers (8), objects of desire (4), and homemakers (2). Similarly, male characters were represented as heroes (18) and as objectifying females (4). Representations of characters as heroes varied from preventing someone from tripping in *My Hero Academia*

(2016) to saving a citizen from a villainous monster in *One Punch Man* (2014).

Three of the four instances of male objectification of females occurred in *Dragon Ball Super* (2017). For example, in this manga, a male character stated that a female's breasts were sagging and made her kiss him as payment for his answering a question (Toriyama, 2017). In *Dr. Stone* (2017), a female character stood, with sparkles around her body, while a male character stared at her with wide eyes and blushed cheeks, steam coming out of his nose. The male gasped, and there was onomatopoeia showing his heart beating. Here, the text and picture worked together to demonstrate that the female character was the object of desire while the male was the objectifier.

In *My Hero Academia* (2016), a female character took on the role of hero twice. In both instances, she used her floating power to stop a male character from falling. In contrast, a male character held the hero role one time by using his strength to destroy a robot that was attacking a female character lying on the ground. Though there is equality in the labels, the contexts are not equivalent. There was a difference in strength when it came to the representations of these two characters. The male character was represented as more powerful and traditionally heroic while the female character was represented as weaker and heroic in a less obvious way. Similarly, in *Boruto: Naruto Next Generations* (2017), a female character is represented as a hero once while saving a male from falling by using a rope.

Male characters were represented in hero roles twice, using visually impressive and strength-based powers to save female characters, such as shadow manipulation and arm growth. In one instance, a female character was represented as cowering behind a male character. The importance was not the number of times a character was the hero/damsel in distress but how writers presented character roles depending on gender.

Variance in text/picture relationships was also present. For example, a counterpoint (Sipe, 1998) (i.e., the picture and text did not align) was present in *Dr. Stone* (2017) when a male character in a heroic role said, "I'm gonna save you" (p. 46). However, he only stated this fact and did not perform any visual action to support this claim within the sequence. Conversely, a male character from *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba* (2018) stated, "I'm gonna save you" while he was carrying his sister to safety (p. 5). This interaction was a congruent relationship (Sipe, 1998). The picture and text aligned. My understanding of character interactions and roles was enhanced because the visual and textual elements created new meaning.

Equal Representation in Victim and Assailant Roles

There were two roles where male and female characters were represented equally within the data corpus—victims and assailants. Female characters were victims 23 times and assailants 24 times, while male characters were victims 24 times and assailants 23 times. *One Piece* (2003) contained two examples of a male character as an assailant. One sequence depicted a male character threatening a female bartender, while another showed a male character taking food from a young girl. These were male characters without powers or special abilities.

Interestingly, female characters as assailants were often not ordinary females. They had transformed bodies and powers which allowed them fight on equal ground with male characters. Lady Alvida from *One Piece* (2003) was represented as an assailant four times. A cursed fruit changed her body in a way that gave her strength in a physical fight. She was larger than most male characters and had supernatural power. Mosquito Girl from *One Punch Man* (2016) was represented as an assailant five times, but she was also a transformed being who was a part woman

and part mosquito. She appeared larger than male characters and had physical attributes of a mosquito which granted her extra abilities. In the case of *Dragon Ball Super* (2017), a female character was represented as an assailant four times in the story while male characters were represented as assailants three times. Of these occurrences, three instances of the female character as an assailant occurred in retaliation for a male character sexualizing her verbally or physically. The other occurrence was unprovoked.

Breaking Stereotypes

Despite the preponderance of traditional gender norms in the data corpus, there were examples of characters breaking gender stereotypes throughout these manga. Female characters were represented as heroes (6), providers (2), and male objectifiers (1). Male characters were represented as damsels in distress (6), caregivers (3), homemakers (2), and objects of desire (1). In *The Way of the House Husband* (2018), the male protagonist was represented as both a caregiver and as a homemaker twice. The manga's premise is that a wife goes to work as the provider while her husband, an ex-Yokuza (i.e., gang) member, stays at home to cook, clean, and babysit other people's children. Throughout most of the story, the male does homemaking tasks and takes on traditionally female roles such as grocery shopping and cooking. Homemaking and caregiving were only counted by the researcher when the main male character interacted with a female character. However, he was also a homemaker and caregiver within the story when female characters were not present.

Only one example of a male character being objectified occurred in the data corpus. In *Black Clover* (2015), there is an interaction that includes a female character wearing a bikini. She offers to "reward" a male character with a "special treat" while looming over him (Tabata, 2015, p. 116).

Visual elements in the scene suggested that she was implying sexual activity. For example, her revealing clothing, her body positioning as she leans over the male character, her suggestive words, and her last name (Enotica, which is one letter different from *erotica*) led to these conclusions. The male character was fully clothed and blushing, while the female showed most of her body and appeared confident. She was smirking and stood with poise. These examples defy expectations established by the shonen manga in this particular data corpus.

Discussion

There are various research studies focused on how gender roles are represented in popular media. However, qualitative multimodal content analysis that examine representations of gender roles in male and female interactions within popular shonen manga are under-researched. This study begins to fill the gap in understanding representations of male/female interactions within popular culture texts such as shonen manga. Building an understanding of popular media literacies such as manga is important for teachers to consider because they are a popular literary mode for students (Schwartz, & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006).

Students learn from popular media and apply these learnings to their interpretations of new information (Tuchman, 2000). The way writers portray characters in popular media affects how students might see and understand people in the real world (Murphey, 2016). Knowing the influence of popular media and understanding how writers portray gender is vital to understanding culture. As some of the most popular manga (according to Amazon), these shonen manga have the potential to influence how readers perceive gender roles in the real world. It is important for teachers and students to critically consider these texts, as well as other popular manga texts and

genres to evaluate and potentially challenge the representations of gender within.

Typically, writers of popular media place female characters in oppressed, domesticated, or victimized roles (Butler, 2011; Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Murphey, 2016). In these manga, traditional gender roles were both perpetuated and broken. In caregiver, homemaker, and objectified roles, females were present more than males. The cases in which males were present in these roles broke stereotypes. While numerically, females and males were nearly equal in their interactions of assailant and victim, the context changed how these actions were perceived. Further, male characters were represented in more traditionally heroic roles than female characters when the two genders interacted. However, not every instance of heroism for females or males was the same. Heroism had a broad range of possibilities that differed between females and males. Despite the number of hero roles they held, female characters were not portrayed equally when compared to male heroes. If a female hero is a hero in less impressive ways, is she just as heroic as her male counterpart? Are traditional gender roles being broken, or are they still present but in less obvious ways?

The visual and textual elements present in these manga supported each other (Gee, 1998; Sipe, 1998) to convey meaning. Meanings were often contextual and dependent on textual and visual cues (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, what characters said in the text did not always align with what they did in the picture. Both the text and pictures were needed to understand what was happening in a sequence. Interpretation of modes is not necessarily inherent, and explicit instruction is necessary to understand better and engage multiple modes (Gee, 1998; Kress, 2003; Serafini, 2014). It is important for readers to be able to interpret multiple modes so that they can understand texts to a fuller extent.

Classroom Application

In this section, I offer three key ways that this study might help inform classroom practice: (1) I explain how teachers might discuss multimodal texts with students, (2) I provide a tool that can be used by students to analyze multimodal texts, (3) I provide ideas and discussion points that can be used to create lessons.

Before beginning a lesson, a teacher could first introduce the concept of multimodal texts to students. After explaining that modes offer different ways to represent and communicate thinking, teachers can then engage students in identifying multimodal texts by asking: What texts can be found in the real world? Introducing different physical or digital multimodal texts, such as manga, comics, or graphic novels, can also be beneficial. For manga specifically, explicit instruction on how to read these texts may be needed. For example, the order in which pages, panels, and speech bubbles are read differ. Consider comparing comics, graphic novels, and manga while teaching the process of reading visual texts. Additionally, different text and picture relationships could be defined as congruent, counterpointing, or complementary. These concepts can be taught by showing examples in multimodal texts where the relationships between pictures and text align, misalign, or work together in complimentary ways.

Teachers can also use the analytical tool (Appendix 1) to help students interpret multimodal texts. Once students can analyze a text using the analytical tool, teachers might use student findings to facilitate a classroom discussion about different ways male and female characters embody roles. Students can compare and contrast specific sequences, genres, or manga as a whole class or in small groups. Teachers can ask students critical questions: Why did one gender have specific roles more than others? How were

these roles identified (visually versus textually)? What is the context of these roles? How was the same hero/damsel role represented differently between characters of different genders? A class discussion allows students to demonstrate an understanding of both modes and gender representations. Because texts can influence personal beliefs, also consider asking: Where have you seen similar/different representations of gender? How do you think people could be influenced by these representations? Have the representations you seen affected your views of gender? How?

Students could apply their findings and understandings of modes and gender representations by rewriting and redrawing sequences in the manga. Before beginning the project, teachers may ask some guiding questions: How were the characters portrayed within the sequences visually and textually? How might someone change this sequence to make the roles more equal? These questions can help students to evaluate gender role representations before they recreate sequences in published works. Allowing students to reimagine sequences also allows them to reflect on societal views of gender and apply their knowledge. Further, students could also use the analytical tool to critique each other's work.

Students can also share their textual analyses through formal literary essays. Teachers might begin by asking probing questions: What character(s) embody what roles? What kind of person is typically represented in these roles? What is the character like? In what context (visual or textual) does a character embody a particular role? How do character representations defy traditional expectations? How does this apply to the real world? Students can then brainstorm using these probing questions to generate ideas and a writing plan. Finally, they can create a written analysis of their findings and thoughts. This assignment allows students to practice writing and

make real-world connections regarding both gender stereotypes and the multiple modes used to convey those stereotypes within the manga.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample used in this study came from Amazon's best sellers list for manga. However, Amazon is non-specific about the exact ways (a mix of recent and historical trends) their list is generated, and it is not the only resource for buying manga. The benefit of triangulating with other store's best sellers might give a more accurate list of manga that is popular today and perhaps over time. Additionally, only one manga genre, shonen, was analyzed in this study and all the manga came from the same company, Viz Media. To build on this research, more genres from different companies will be used to generate a more representative sample of manga.

I only considered interactions between males and females. In a future study, representations of same gender interactions or characters on their own will be considered. Diversifying these points of analysis would provide a better understanding of characters and how they represent or enact gender.

Further, there were large gaps between the dates of publication for the manga in the data corpus. The original printing for *Hunter x Hunter* was in 1998 and *One Piece* was in 1997. Meanwhile, *Demon Slayer* and *The Way of the House Husband* were both published in 2018. Depictions of females in manga may be based on factors of writer perceptions of cultural/historical context at the time of their creation. As such, doing an analysis of popular manga across time might reveal interesting and more nuanced findings.

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Male and Female Interactions

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Male and Female Interactions

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Appendix 1*Analytical Tool for Analysing Shonen Manga*

| Manga Title | | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|------------------|
| Image of Sequence | Description | Visual Elements | Textual Elements | Relationship | Role |
| | Characters: Interaction: Pose/Touch: Reason that actions occurred: | Setting: Composition: Signs/Symbols: | Dialogue: Onomatopoeia: Thought: | Concurring or Congruent: Complementary or Relaying: Counterpoint or Deviation: | Male: Female: |
| Interpretations of gender roles: | | | | | |
| Notes: | | | | | |
| Definitions: Interaction: Verbal/physical communication between two or more characters. Pose: The way in which a character is standing, sitting, gesturing, etc. Composition: Where things are located on the page (text, characters, objects). Dialogue: Two or more characters speaking with one another. Onomatopoeia: A word that represents a sound. Example: Buzz, meow, skrrt. Concurring or Congruent: The text and pictures have the same meaning. Complimentary or Relaying: The text and pictures have separate meanings but work together to create new meanings. Counterpoint or Deviation: The text and picture have opposite meanings. | | | | | |