

Male and Female Game Players' Preferences for Game Characters and Real-world Personalities in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Game characters are important for game players. Based on in-depth interviews with 20 young game players in Japan, this study explores why male and female players prefer some game characters. This study revealed that some male and female players love to find hidden the aspects of characters, called *gap-moe* in Japan. Both male and female players find both stereotypical and non-stereotypical aspects of game characters of the opposite sexes, but male players focus on masculine aspects of male game characters. Some players recognized the influences of game character preferences on their attitudes toward persons in the real world, others denied such influence.

Keywords

game characters, gender stereotypes, Japan

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have been popular among both males and females of not only the younger generations but also the older ones. The number of female game players has been increasing. For example, 46.5% of males and 35.8% of females claimed to be regular players of digital games in Japan (Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association, 2018). In younger generations, or people in their teens and 20s, more than half of females reported playing games regularly in 2017. Given the popularity of digital games among diverse players, digital games need to reflect the more varied opinions and views of the players.

Gender stereotypes and their effects are among concerns regarding diversity in digital game communities. Digital games have been criticized for their unequal gender representation. Male characters are dominant (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory,

2009), whereas female ones are often in secondary roles and sexualized (Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016).

In addition, Japan has several unique features. First, Japan is often considered a patriarchal society (Pelletier-Gagnon & Picard, 2015). In 2018, it ranked low, 110th among 149 nations, in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2018). As Kowert, Breuer, and Quandt (2017) developed a model, sexualization of female game characters can promote sexism among male players in Japan. If the games that were originally made for males become popular among females, the latter can also develop biased stereotypes about their self-images.

Second, Japan has game genres unique for females and males, called *otome* and idol game respectively. The former features handsome males for female game players, whereas the latter focuses on pretty and sexy female characters for male game players. The differences in game character representations in these game genres can cause stereotypical or unrealistic perceptions about males and females in the real world.

Therefore, this study focused on the preferences for game characters and real-world personalities of game players in Japan and compared these preferences between male and female players, and between the preferences for game characters and those of real-world personalities.

GENDER GAPS AND MEDIA AND GENDER STUDIES IN JAPAN

Regarding Japan's low status in gender equality, some researchers explained the backgrounds. For example, Suzuki (2017) listed division of labor by gender, long working hours, employment systems, inconsistent management practice, and gender identity of a woman as a wife as reasons underlining in this gender inequality from the perspective of work and family. She also mentioned traditional gender role attitudes and stereotypes and expectations as factors perpetuating gender inequality.

The media can be a source of information on gender stereotypes. According to the cultivation theory, those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the television world (Morgan, 2009). This theory can explain the relationships between media representations and gender stereotypes or sexism (Morgan, 1982, 1987) in discussing media effects on gender stereotypes. In Japan, Iwao (2000) analyzed gender representations of TV dramas and animations and showed that 70 % of the characters are male. Regarding the media effects, Saito (2007) demonstrated that those with heavy TV exposure are likely to adopt more traditional gender role attitudes especially among women, but not among male respondents, or those with less education.

Media and gender studies have emphasized importance of characters. For example, Hoffner (1996) showed that nearly all boys and about half of the girls selected same-sex favorite television characters on the basis of interviews with children ages 7-12. Some studies have illustrated the importance of fictional characters among younger generations. Välisalo (2017) studied a fantasy movie and noted that younger audience (aged 16 to 25 years) places more importance on characters compared with older audiences. In animation studies in Japan, Sugawa (2013) showed that female viewers prefer characters with combined masculine and feminine features.

Regarding video games, Kowert, Breuer, and Quandt (2017) developed an integrated model of exclusion and sexism in video games content and culture. Their model included three-tiered processes. The first process involves the socialization of play: video game play is considered a more appropriate activity for boys than girls. The

second process concerns the gender balance in the game industry. As females are discouraged to play games, males have dominated the game industry. As a result, female game characters are under-represented and portrayed more sexually. The third process includes the exclusionary gaming communities. The first and second processes cause the lower participation of female gamers in gaming communities, causing sexist and misogynistic beliefs and attitudes in these communities.

In Japan, game play has been more popular among boys rather than girls (Shiraishi, 1995). Among girls, games using animal characters, such as *animal crossing: new leaf* (Nintendo, 2012), and puzzle games are popular. The main or player-controlled characters of traditional role-playing games are more likely to males (Yagi, 2002). Yuji and Mori (1995) analyzed the packages of 944 video games and found that 63% were male characters and only 16.2% female ones. They also found that 80.1% of the female characters were submissive and only 19.9% were dominant. More recently, Hata (2019) analyzed player characters of *Dragon Quest* (CHUNSOFT, 1986) and *Final Fantasy* (SQUARE, 1987) series, and found that 31% of player characters were women, and 53% and 69% respectively of them were men. Hata also found that HP (hit or health points) was higher among male characters than female characters. Tompkins, Lynch, Ingeborg va Driel, and Fritz (2016) compared female game characters in American and Japanese video games using You Tube movies. They showed that younger girls and less sexual representations were found in Japanese games. In addition, the ratio of female workers in the gaming industry in Japan is about 15% in 2018 (CESA, 2019), and females were likely to be younger than males.

This information suggests that video games and other media, such as TV dramas, movies, animation, can cultivate gender stereotype attitudes or beliefs. However, there is no study that examines empirically the effects of gender representation in video games, and few studies have explored how and why game players preferred certain game characters in Japan. Additionally, a small number of game studies have compared the preferences for game characters and real-world personalities and focused on the differences between preferences of male and female preferences.

UNIQUE GAME GENRES IN JAPAN

According to App Annie (2019), the top grossing mobile game apps worldwide in 2018 was *Fate/Grand Order* (FGO, DELiGHT WORKS, 2015), which was developed in Japan and has been popular in several Asian Countries. The first version of this Fate series, *Fate/stay night* (TYPE-MOON, 2004), included sexual and violent scenes and was prohibited for players aged below 18 players. The FGO was developed in 2015 for smartphones as an all-ages version and has been popular among both male and female players. In Japan, role-playing games and other game genres (e.g., *otome* and idol games) are also popular on smartphones.

Popular Idol Games among Male and Female Players

Japan's idol games were originally designed for male players. The most popular is the *Idolmaster* series (Namco, 2005). In a typical idol game, a player-controlled character, usually a male, can be a producer of a female idol or idol group. Some idol games accompany music and rhythm, where players participate actively in the music sessions by touching their smartphone screens. Although these game genres were originally designed for male players, some have been popular among females. An example of a popular male idol games among female players is the *Ensemble Stars* (Happy Elements, 2015). In the typical idol games for women, the gender roles are the opposite: a player-controlled character, usually a female, can be a producer of a male idol or idol group, or a newly comer student.

Recently, some voice actors of animated characters of idol games have become famous and hold fan events for the idol game and anime fans; real idol groups have emerged from those games and animations (Kaneko, 2018). As the idol industry in Japan is among the most profitable entertainment areas (Yano Research Institute, 2018), the combination of idol industry and games can be a successful business. However, game and idol fans potentially have stereotyped gender views if the games they play portray traditional feminine stereotypical idols.

Otome Games for Female Players

In Japan, *otome* games are designed for female players. *Otome* literally means girls, but this genre is also popular among female adults. In a typical *otome* game, the main player-controlled character is a woman. She can choose one of some attractive males as a romantic partner. The first game for females was *Angelique* (Koei, 1994), produced in 1994 by Ruby Party, a team of Koei, and consisted of only female programmers (Kim, 2009). At the time, Keiko Erikawa, currently chairperson and representative director of Koei Tecmo Holdings, focused on increasing female gaming population of role-playing games and developed a game for girls made by girls (Kim, 2008). *Angelique* was influenced by *shoujo manga*, or comics for girls in Japan. Koei continued to launch other games for women, such as *Harukanaru toki no naka de* (Koei, 2000) and *Kin'iro no Corda* (Koei, 2003). Some other games for women, such as *Hakuouki* (Idea Factory, 2008; for more details, see Hasegawa, 2013) and *Touken Ranbu* (DMM.com, 2015), include historical contexts, featuring samurai heroes. Romantic love simulation games, such as *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* (Konami, 2002), and idol games for women, such as *IDOLiSH7* (Geechs/G2 studio, 2015), have also been developed and are popular among females in Japan. Although Japan has more than 20 years of *otome* game history, the number of studies about *otome* games is small. For example, Koide and Obama (2018) introduced a brief history of the *otome* games and explained the importance of characters, story, and voice actors featured by color. However, few game studies have covered how and why female players enjoy those games, as well as the preferences for game characters in those *otome* games in Japan.

Previous studies have suggested that the preferences of male and female game players in Japan can be different from those found in the U. S. or Europe. Therefore, based on in-depth interviews, this study focused on how male and female players in Japan perceive game characters and why they prefer certain male or female game characters. In addition, this study explored these players' preferences for male and females in the real world.

To fulfil the need for empirical findings regarding the differences of male and female players' preferences for and perception of game characters, we developed three major research questions (RQs).

RQ1: What kinds of male and female game characters are preferred or disliked by game players in Japan and why? Are there any differences between male and female players?

RQ2: How do male and female game players perceive common male and female game characters in Japan? Are there any differences between their perceptions?

RQ3: What kinds of appearances and personalities of males and females in the real world are preferred and disliked by male and female game players in Japan? Are there any differences between male and female players?

METHODS

Participants

We interviewed 20 game players (10 males, Player ID: A–J, and 10 females, Player ID: K–T) in Japan from June to August 2018. We recruited game players who reported (1) playing more than three hours a week, (2) favoring human-like game characters, and (3) to be willing to tell their preferences for game characters and real-world personalities. The participants volunteered for the interviews after seeing or hearing about the call for the participants. Interview sessions lasted between two and two and a half hours and were held in the office of the first author. The participants were aged 19–24 years old (average age = 20.7 years). One female interviewee had a listening disability; communication with her was conducted through both speech and text on a computer. Formal ethics approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board for Human Research of the first author's institutional affiliation. A written informed consent was obtained from each interviewee prior to the interviews. The interviews were administered by one or two interviewers, that is, the first author or the first and the second authors. The interviewees received JPY 2,000 (if two hours; nearly USD 20) or JPY 2,500 (if two and a half hours; about USD 25) for their participation.

Measures

- (1) Games devices and games played for six months. We asked participants to list the game consoles or media they played in six months. We also asked them to list up to five games they most frequently played with in six months.
- (2) Favored and unfavored game characters. Participants were asked to list their favored and unfavored male and female game characters and explain why, as well as to provide screenshots of the characters, dialogues, and scenes they liked as they remembered.
- (3) Perception of male and female game characters. Participants were also asked to talk about common and typical male and female game characters. As the question is too vague, we provided some examples. Some studies have suggested that male characters are often strong and muscular; female ones often have exposed more skin than male ones, are sexy, and helplessness. Participants were also asked what they think about common male and female game characters.
- (4) Favored and unfavored males and females in the real world. We asked about their favored real-world male and female individuals in terms of appearance and personality. We also asked their favored and unfavored male or female romantic and marriage partner.
- (5) Relationships between preferences for game characters and those for real-world personalities. We asked whether their preferences for game characters influenced those for real-world male and female personalities or vice versa. We examined whether their preferences for game characters and those for real-world personalities were different.

RESULTS

The Daily Game Play

Of the 20 interviewed players, 17 used smartphones for game play, making smartphones the most frequently used media. The PC was the second most used media with seven players. Five players said they play in arcade facilities, whereas four use PlayStation 4. Participants mentioned 45 games that they played most

Table 1: Preferred female characters of male game players

Player ID	Name of Characters	Name of Games	Developer/Designer	Reasons for Liking the Character
A	Yuriko Nanao	The Idolm@ster Million Live! Theater Days	Bandai Namco Entertainment	I felt sympathetic because she likes reading and, I thought, she is docile. In fact, she is active and loves fantasy fictions. I like the gap, difference.
A	Honoka Ayase	The Idolm@ster Cinderella Girls Starlight Stage	Cygames	She takes ballet lessons. I feel sympathetic with her because I took ballet lessons, too. At first, she was a formal and serious character. She has become cheerful like an idol. I saw her growth. I like her early days, too.
B	Paya	The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild	Nintendo	She is like a granddaughter of the head of Inmpa in Kakariko village. She is shy. When a treasure has been stolen, she feels responsible for it and gets depressed. She is serious and modest. It is good to see her behaviors similar to traditional Japanese women.
D	Mash Kyrielight	Fate/Grand Order	DELiGHT WORKS	She was shy in the beginning and grew up in an adventure with a main character. In the end, she became trustworthy and helpful in the game. I would like to protect her. She respects and protects a player (=a main character)
D	Yubari	Kantai Collection	Kadokawa Games	She likes mechanical things. Since I like mechanical things, her interest is common with mine. She is so kind, and she leads a main character. I like characters who are like an elder sister.
F	Nanoha Takamachi	Mahou Shoujo Ririkaru Nanoha A's Portable: The Battle of Aces	WITCHCRAFT	Nanoha often fights with her full strength and full power. She becomes a friend with a girl who was her enemy, and helped the girl. I like her because she is mentally strong. She is not only kawaii but also cool. She has something I do not have. She has an appeal for me.
I	Momoko Suou	The Idolm@ster Million Live! Theater Days	Bandai Namco Entertainment	She was a child actress and became an idol. She is 11 years old. I like nearly all aspects of her such as her soft hair. I like her cold and stuck-up personality because she had reasons to behave in that way based on her experience.
I	Minako Satake	The Idolm@ster Million Live! Theater Days	Bandai Namco Entertainment	Her parents own a Chinese restaurant. She is 18 years old, and likes taking a good care of her younger sister. I have a younger sister; I feel she is like comrade or friend.

frequently in six months. The most popular are FGO (five players) and *The Idolm@ster Cinderella Girls Starlight Stage* (five players; Cygames, 2015), followed by *Touken Ranbu* (three players) and *the Idolm@ster Million Live! Theater Days* (three players; Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2017).

Favored and Unfavored Game Characters

Favored female game characters

Thirty-six female game characters were mentioned and 18 were favored by both male and female players. Table 1 shows examples of female game characters preferred by male players. Some male players said they enjoyed seeing shy and docile girls who later grow up to be cheerful or trustworthy girls (A, D). Other male players felt sympathy toward female characters with whom they find similar preferences, such as “taking ballet lessons” (A), “liking mechanical things” (D), and “taking good care of a younger sister” (I). Some male players prefer feminine features, such as modesty like what is expected from a traditional Japanese woman (B), having a tender heart of an older sister (D), and being kind and taking good care of a younger sister (I). Although the appearances of preferred female characters were likely to be cute or sexy, some male players mentioned masculine features, such as being a mentally strong and a cool girl that is different from the player (F), and having a “cold and stuck-up personality” (I).

Female players also listed 18 favored female characters. Some female players listed characters with somewhat masculine features, as shown in Table 2. For example, one player (L) said she likes 2B, android, who does not express emotion. Another female player (N) said she likes scary and aggressive *Janne Darc Alther* in FGO. Other

Table 2: Preferred female characters of female game players

Player ID	Name of Characters	Name of Games	Developer/Designer	Reasons for Liking the Character
L	2B	NieR:Automata	PlatinumGames	She is an android, and she should not express her emotions. But when her partner, 9S, disappears, she searched for him extensively. She is truly humane and a thoughtful toward others.
K	GLaDOS	Portal, Potal2	Valve	She is often sarcastic. When a player is about to escape, she becomes hasty. I think she is <i>kawaii</i> when the android is impatient; such a characteristic is so humane.
M	Suzu Fujibayashi	Tales of Phantasia	Namco	She is an 11-years-old ninja and she has to conceal her emotions. She gradually started smiling. She is too honest and frank that she ends up hurting others without noticing. When she killed her parents who were controlled by the enemy, she cried for the first time. She is <i>kawaii</i> but strong. I have read a book based on her for eight times.
N	Janne Da Arc Alter	Fate/Grand Order	DELIGHT WORKS	She is pretty. She is usually scary and aggressive, and says "I kill you" or something threatenng. In a special Shinjuku story, she cared for the main character, and said she wanted to dance with the main character. It was the moment she was shown as naïve. In that moment, she was extremely <i>kawaii</i> . She is trustworthy when she is on our side or team.
O	Nanami Shiranui	Norn9	Idea Factory & Otomate	In the beginning, she did not show any emotion. She was fragile and did not accept herself as she was. She was misunderstood and hated by the male character <i>Akito Shukuri</i> ; she thought it was okay even if he killed her. After <i>Akito</i> realized she was fragile and weak, they gradually become attracted to each other. She started to smile subtly. I like the process of her change.
P	Nao Kamiya	The idolm@ster Cinderella Girls Starlight Stage	Cygames	She is usually <i>tsun-tsun siteiru</i> (cold), but sometimes shows her real feeling. She is really thinking about her friends.
Q	Takane Shijou	The Idolm@ster Million Live! Theater Days	Bandai Namco Entertainment	She is like a mature woman. Her voice fits well with her appearance.
R	Charlotte	Shironeko Purojekuto	Colopl	She is sexy and strong. She often says, "I am tired. I'd like to take a rest." But she is strong and serious when in fights. I like a sexy and independent female character with toned muscles. I like the contrast of her "on and off" (strong when she is "on", and lazy when she is "off").. I like the moment she gets in her "on" mode.

female players mentioned the following favored features: strong (M, R), independent (R), having toned muscles (R), and concealing emotion or not smiling (K, M, O). Interestingly, sfemale game players mentioned combined feminine and masculine features, such as such as being sexy and independent (R) and being *kawaii* (cute and lovely) but strong (M).

Among five female game players who reported playing idol games for men, three players (P, Q, T) listed one or two favored female game characters. For example, one player (Q), who reported liking *Takane Shijou* of *the Idolm@ster Million Live! Theater Days*, said: "She is like a mature woman. Her voice fits well with her appearance." Other two players (P, T) chose *tsundere* girls, who are usually *tsun-tsun*, or surly and unfriendly and become *dere-dere*, or affectionate and dependent on the specific persons (Matsumura, 2012). For example, player (P) listed *Nao Kamiya* of *The Idolm@ster Cinderella Girls Starlight Stage* and said: "She is usually *tsun-tsun siteiru*, or cold, but sometimes shows her real feeling. She is really thinking about her friends."

Favored male game characters

Forty-nine male game characters were listed. Male players selected 17 male favored male game characters, whereas their female counterparts selected 22 favored male game characters. As Table 3 shows, some male players like somewhat atypical characters (B, C, D), such as attractive enemy characters (C, D) or compassionate and naïve supporting characters (B). The appearances of many male game characters selected by male players were masculine. Several male players (D, F) explained the story and the worldview of the game, and their favorite words of the characters in the

Table 3: Preferred male game characters of male players

Player ID	Name of Characters	Name of Games	Developer /Designer	Reasons for Liking the Character
B	Goro Majima	Yakuza 0	SEGA	He loves fighting. He is strange and not normal. But he is sometimes serious and cool. He is also compassionate and naïve. He does not know the real world. He is interesting because he has the gap, or difference.
B	Kazuma Kiryu	Yakuza Kiwami	SEGA	He is a former yakuza. The story starts when he gets out from jail. He was in prison because of the penalty of a brother-like fellow who killed a yakuza boss. In a game, he is involved or has fights with some yakuza members. He fights to protect someone. For example, he fights to protect a child of a woman he liked but died. He is an enthusiastic fighter even if the fight is not relevant to him. I can never be a yakuza member. So, I like him because he is different from me.
C	Sans	Undertale	Fox T.	Sans is the first character that a main character met for the first time. Sans tried to kill the main character, but he knew that he needed to protect the main character by keeping a promise with Toriel, who laughed at his jokes. Sans said, with his black eyes, "I could kill you anytime." His words really, with musical accompaniment, hit me. I thought he is an exceptionally good guy.
D	Larry "PIXY" Foulke	Ace Combat Zero The Belkan War	Namco	PIXY was a colleague of a main character in the beginning, but he doubted the significance of the war, and went to the side of the enemy. At the last boss standing, he fights with the main character in the final stage. In the end, he sent a video letter saying he would stay in battlefields to look for reasons to fight in an epilogue. I was impressed with his way of life and his dependable partnership. He made me think of what a war is.
D	Yellow 13	Ace Combat 04 Shattered Skies	Namco	He is a rival fighter pilot. Even when he achieved significant military results, he was never proud of them. As the main character is grown up, he said, "there is a great pilot in the enemy. The person will be an ace in the future." He also cares about his colleagues. He is cool.
F	Emiya (Archer)	Fate/Grand Order	DELIGHT WORKS	Emiya told the main character to die by drowning in the ideal philosophy. The main character wanted to be a hero of justice and became a hero of justice. However, Emiya said that when you protect someone, you do not protect others. The point is about selection. It is a story of political philosophy. It relates to international politics that I am studying now.

last scenes. For example, a male player (D) listed Larry "PIXY" Foulke of Ace Combat Zero The Belkan War (Namco, 2006) said as follows: "a PIXY was a colleague of a main character in the beginning, but he doubted the significance of the war, and went to the side of the enemy. At the last boss standing, he fights with the main character in the final stage. In the end, he sent a video letter saying he would stay in battlefields to look for reasons to fight in an epilogue. I was impressed with his way of life and his dependable partnership. He made me think of what a war is." Another male player (F) talked about Emiya (Archer) of FGO and said as follows: "Emiya told the main character to die by drowning in the ideal philosophy. The main character wanted to be a hero of justice and became a hero of justice. However, Emiya said that when you protect someone, you do not protect others. The point is about selection. It is a story of political philosophy. It relates to international politics that I am studying now." Male players were more influenced, moved by and learned from male than female game characters.

Female game players listed 22 favored male characters. As shown in Table 4, they said that finding hidden and unusual aspects of game characters made them to start loving the characters. For example, one female player (N), who played *Sengoku*

Table 4: Preferred male game characters of female players

Player ID	Name of Characters	Name of Games	Developer/Designer	Reasons for Liking the Character
K	Archer	Fate/Grand Order	DELiGHT WORKS	He lost his parents and family in a disaster when he was a child. Only Archer has survived. He is a lonely hero and makes a sacrifice of himself to help others. In an affected manner, he says "my image is my strongest self." But he is cool.
K	Wheatley	Portal, Portal 2	Valve	He has an expressive and speaking eye. It is a simple eye, but successful in showing emotions.
K	Nizo Okada	Fate/Grand Order	DELiGHT WORKS	He is a cruel serial killer. He is a sore loser. He was thrilled when someone praised him. He is like a puppy. He could not kill a former friend who betrayed him. He loves the former friend.
M	Toshirou Namazuo	Touken Ranbu	DMM.com	First, I like his face. I tend to like someone who is hurt but struggles to move forward. He lost his memory, and he is fragile. He is usually not serious and mocks the use of honorific terms. But he becomes serious in fighting. I like this contradiction.
M	Tsukasa Suou	Ensemble Stars	Happy Elements	He is a son of a noble family. In the past, he was like a doll; he did not smile at all. He did not know what he should do. When he found his place in a new idol unit, he tried to support other freshmen as much as possible. I think he is a light-attributed person who encourages others. He likes sweets. I like his smile, and he is <i>kawaii</i> , like a woman.
N	Kageie Kakizaki	Sengoku Knight Blood	Marvelous, Kadokawa, and Otomate.	He is usually <i>hetare</i> , or wimp and chicken, and a careless goofy character. But I found he is the most trustworthy in a special story. In a love story, he confessed his love to the main character (player-controlled-character) when he was drunk. He is usually shy. He is really good because he is strong and masculine when fighting.
O	Kakeru Yuiga	Norn9	Idea Factory & Otomate	He is a good leader, and he supports others without getting attention. For example, he showed one extreme solution and another compromising one, and made others choose the latter. He seems to be always saying the extreme, but he is so smart that he has calculated everything.

Knight Blood (Marvelous, Kadokawa, and Otomate, 2017), one of *otome* games, explained her favored male character, *Kageie Kakizaki* as follows: "He is usually *hetare*, or wimp and chicken, and has a careless, goofy character. But I find him as being the most trustworthy character in a special story. In a love story, he confessed his love to the main character (a player-controlled character) when he was drunk. He is usually shy. He is really good because he is strong and masculine when fighting." Another player (K) who liked FGO explained about her favored male character, called *Nizo Okada*, as follows: "He is a cruel serial killer. He is a sore loser. He was thrilled when someone praised him." She also added that the character is like a puppy and she started to like the character when she discovered his inner and hidden feelings. Female players look at both masculine and feminine features of male game characters, especially their weakness and humane qualities. In addition, the development of a romantic relationship with a character and between characters can be important aspects for some players (O, N).

In video games, strength in battles can be important, and some players (M, N, P) mentioned strength as the most appealing factor for male characters. Meanwhile, other players (R, M) listed *kawaii* male characters. For example, one player (M) who reported liking *Tsukasa Suou* of *Ensemble Stars*, an idol game for women, said that "I think he is a light-attributed character who encourages others. He likes sweets. I like his smile, and he is *kawaii* like a woman." Another player (R) who indicated playing *Shironeko Purojekuto* (Colopl, 2014) talked about the game character Dylan: "His eyes are straight, and he looks *kawaii* with his small mouth. He looks more pretty rather than strong." Regarding game genres, no clear differences were found whether it is whether it is *otome* games or not.

Unfavored female and male game characters

Regarding unfavored characters, some male and female players listed typical antagonists or enemy characters (B, C, M). Other unfavored male characters of male players are “men with make-ups or elaborated hair styles” (F), and “a character who was kind and a supporter in the beginning, but betrayed the main character” (A). Regarding unfavored characters, a male player (A) mentioned he did not like “a sexy small child,” “a character whose clothes are unnaturally too small to expose her skin (I).” One female player (N) mentioned she did not like a main female character (player-controlled character) because she was too foolish not to understand some obvious appeals or to act selfishly. Another female player (R) listed several female characters of *Shironeko Purojekuto* and said that these characters were too feminine, too dependent and weak in battles, and had annoying voices when making killer moves. A female player (Q) also said she does not like only *kawaii* female characters.

Perception of Female and Male Game Characters in Japan

Regarding female characters, some male players agreed that female game characters expose skin in Japan (A, B, C, I). One male player (D) said that he saw various kinds of girls, including *kawaii* or sexy ones: a shy and docile girl, an active girl who likes sports, girls who are good at science or mechanic, and a boyish girl.

Some female players (P, T) mentioned that many female characters are all *kawaii*. Others agreed that female characters expose more skin compared with male characters (K, O, P, S). One interviewee (K) complained that a limited-time event *gacha*, a kind of lottery within games, provides female characters with swim suits; she wanted more male characters in the event *gacha*. Other players (M, Q) mentioned that female characters are usually strong, not helpless, and are often both strong and *kawaii*. One interviewee (O) reported seeing many different types of female characters in terms of personality in idol games for men.

Regarding male characters, some male players agreed that they often see male game characters with strong muscles. In addition, other male players said, “male characters are divided into two categories: cool and handsome characters or *otaku* characters who like animation or games” (D), “I found many irregular characters” (B), “male characters who use magic are likely to be slim” (C), and “I see many boy characters with short pants” (F).

The perceptions of female players were different from those of male players. For example, one female interviewee (N), who reported playing *otome* games, said she saw many handsome men and beautiful boys, but rarely saw muscular or “macho” men. However, she saw “hidden macho” (lean but muscular) men. Other interviewees (M, O) said they saw many male characters with gaps or different features: overbearing but weak or appearing weak with but with strong conviction. A player (Q) said many male characters are sensitive and cool.

Preferences of Males and Females in the Real World.

A male player (F) mentioned that he likes persons with a strong will for both men and women in the real world. Another male player (D) said he likes someone who has similar values with him. Other male players’ preferences in the real world are “a woman who can think and act independently” (F) and “a woman who leads like an older sister,” (D). Male players also preferred “a man who is easy to talk with” (A) or “a calm and cool man” (E).

A female player (N) preferred a person who can judge good or bad for both men and woman in the real world. Another female player (O) told us that she likes cheerful, polite, flexible, and interesting men. Other preferences for males were gentle (K, N,

S). Female players were more realistic in terms of identifying marriage partners than male players were. For example, a female player prefers a husband who helps in the house chores and does not have traditional gender roles (O). Another female player said she prefers a husband with high income (P). Regarding females, some female players prefer cool, friendly, and enthusiastic women (S), and a woman who considers others, and expresses her opinions (N).

Preferences for Game Characters and Real-world Personalities.

Some male players had similar preferences for game characters and real-world personalities (B, D, E, F, I). In this area, we asked the direction of effects. A male player (I) who likes idol games said he was influenced by game characters and that the ideal standards for females in the real can be elevated because game characters are created to be accepted easily by males. Some players mentioned that they experienced both directions of effects: effects of preferences for game characters on those for real-world personalities, and effects of preferences for real-world personalities on those for game characters (D, F, I). Others said that they experienced only the effects for real-world personalities on those for game characters (A, E). A male player (B) who plays Yakuza series mentioned that games are unrealistic, and he likes game characters because they are different from himself.

Some male players also mentioned that they were influenced their mothers (D, F): “My father said to me, I like a woman like my mother (who died) (D).” Another male player (F) said: “I don’t like a woman like my mother. She cannot do anything on her own.” Some players also mentioned that they were influenced by characters in animation (C, D, F), and light novels (F).

Some female players said that they dreamed of romantic scenes to be real, and preferred similar personality or situations in the real world (N, S, O). A female player (N) said that she prefers serious male game characters and a serious man in the real world. Other female players said they were not affected by game characters (K, M, P, Q). Another female player (R) said that she was not influenced by game characters. She added that she likes independent relationships with her marriage partner like in a TV drama.

DISCUSSION

Favored and Unfavored Game Characters

Concerning RQ1, some female players mentioned that finding hidden and unusual aspects of game characters made them to start loving those characters. This phenomenon is called “gap *moe*” in Japanese. This term refers to a situation when a character’s contradictory characteristics, or behaviors make them likeable (Matsumura, 2012; Urban Dictionary, 2016). Thus, many female characters look at the different sides of a character. As Sugawa (2013) suggested, with regard to animation, female game players in Japan prefer characters with both masculine and feminine features of game characters. These players seek balance between masculine and feminine features. The former is required or demanded in a society or a game story, even for females, whereas the latter allow them to express their real and honest feelings or emotions. However, only feminine characters were rarely selected by female participants, whereas some male characters chose only feminine characters in their reasons of preferences. Favoring both feminine and masculine features can reduce sexism. Meanwhile, they think that the traditionally feminine features are at least partially required, which can anchor self-images of female players, or female images of males. Similarly, although both masculine and feminine features of male characters were mentioned by female players, traditionally masculine features, such as strength in fights, are partially required to keep the stereotypical views toward

males. Further empirical study can explore the effects of their preferences on their attitudes of sexism.

In addition, preferences of female characters who play *idol* games for men were not clearly different from players who play *otome* games. Some female players also liked *tsun-dere* girls who have masculine and feminine features when playing idol games for men. The results suggest that game designers are creating male and female characters that will be liked by both male and female game players even in games for men.

Some male players also explore both masculine and feminine features of female characters. However, comparing their preferences with those of female players, theirs can be more traditional for both female and male game characters, especially for the latter. The reasons can be explained in two ways. First, game play is not traditionally for females. Female game players are likely to be more liberal, independent, and possessing masculine views than other females. Second, female players are less likely to play masculine games, such as shooting, fighting, Yakuza, horror, or military games where masculine male characters are more dominant. Even in *idol* games, which are made for men, some female game characters can be partially strong in their attitudes and beliefs. This study also suggests that game genres they play can affect their preferences of game characters.

Perceptions of Male and Female Game Characters in Japan

Regarding RQ2, male and female players agreed that female game characters are likely to expose more skins in Japanese games, but they also mentioned both stereotypical and anti-stereotypical aspects of game characters. The game genres that they like and the perceptions of players may be different. Further empirical quantitative studies, such as content analyses, in Japan can confirm these results.

Preferences for Game Characters and Real-world Personalities.

Some male and female players mentioned that they were influenced by game characters. Other players said they were not affected by game characters; they were independent. Some male players also mentioned the effects of animation and light novel; one female player admitted that she was influenced by TV dramas. As Saito (2007) demonstrated, young females can be cultivated by TV dramas in their gender roles. Further studies about game, animation, TV drama characters can reveal precise effects.

Limitations of This Study and Suggestions for Further Study

This study has several limitations. First, we interviewed only 20 game players, making the results not generalizable for young game players in Japan. Second, we originally planned to interview high school students and young workers, but we could not do so because of the lack of funding. All interviewees were university students. Many of them belong to a religion-related university. Therefore, they might reflect religious attitudes. Third, the interviewers included a faculty member. Therefore, the interviewees might have unconsciously socially desirable answers.

Despite these limitations, this study is significantly valuable because it provides concrete examples about preferences for game characters and real-world personalities of young game players in Japan. This study found that both male and female players examine the masculinity and femininity of characters, and these perspectives can diminish attitudes of sexism. However, compared with female players, male players were more traditional. They like the feminine features of female game characters, and masculine features of male characters. If some male players continue to have stereotyped gender views, they might experience some conflicts with young women

in their relationships, romantic love, or marriages. Further studies can explore the effects of gender representation in digital games, animation, and TV dramas.

Meanwhile, the preferences of female game characters by female players seem to be more superficial than those for male game characters by male players. Female game players are more likely to play rhythm and music games, and love simulation games, but they demand for a more in-depth story to make them think about their way of life. A more philosophical thinking can be cultivated for female players (e.g., career development games for women, especially in the science or engineering field, and marriage games for independent relationship for both men and women).

CONCLUSION

Game characters are important for game players. Based on in-depth interviews with 20 young game players in Japan, this study explored why male and female players prefer some characters. This study showed that some players, especially female players, love to find the hidden aspects of characters. Both male and female players find both stereotypical and non-stereotypical aspects of game characters of the opposite sexes, but male players have more traditional gender views than female players. Although some players confess that they dream to realize similar relationships with real persons, others denied the influence of the game characters.

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