How is the *Gacha* System Reported on in Japan?

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ABSTRACT

This study explains how the *gacha*, a random-type item provider system in mobile online games or game apps, is reported on in Japan by analyzing 233 newspaper articles. Results revealed that business frames were the most frequently used. After *gacha* became controversial in 2012, its problematic social nature was reported. After the controversy, news stories shifted focus more to the inaccuracy of probability rates of special items. The Japanese newspapers reported the innovative but controversial nature of *gacha* by balancing complaints from consumers, concerns and criticism from governmental organizations, and the profits and social responsibility of the game industry.

Keywords

Gacha, in-game purchases, Japan, children, adolescents, players

A HISTORY OF IN-GAME PURCHASES AND *GACHA* IN JAPAN

The *gashapon* (*gacha*) is a random-type item provider system in digital games. It was first introduced in *Maple Story*, released in Japan on December 3, 2003, with a basic free-to-play and item-based billing system (Katsuta 2007).

Mobile phone games have been popular since around 2003 in Japan. A free-to-play business model was adopted in online games, and *gacha* became increasingly popular in Japan. The number of companies involved in social games has increased and the Japanese social game market expanded rapidly from 2008–2011 (Ernkvist 2016; Koyama 2016). Simultaneously, the major Japanese social game platforms shifted from cell or feature phones to smartphones.

Gacha can be paid for or free. However, some players are excited by the speculative spirit and purchase online *gacha* products with real money to obtain extremely rare items. Therefore, expenditure on *gacha* has increased rapidly and become a social problem in Japan. On May 6, 2012, Japanese media reported that the Consumer Affairs Agency would ban *kompu gacha* (complete *gacha*) based on the regulations of the Act

Against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Presentations. *Kompu gacha* is a mechanism whereby players can obtain new items after collecting specific items of several different types (Consumer Affairs Agency 2012).

In 2016, the Japan Online Game Association and Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association (CESA) established guidelines about random-type item provision methods and the protection of minors in the Japanese game industry (CESA 2016; Koeder & Tanaka 2017; Koeder et al. 2018). The Japanese social game company also set monetary limits of ≤5,000 yen for players aged 15 years or younger and 10,000 yen for players aged 18 years or younger (Shibuya et al. 2015).

In Japan, researchers have explored players' motivations for playing social games (Arai 2013), business models for social games (Tanaka & Yamaguchi 2015), and long-term effects of in-game purchases and event game mechanics on young mobile social game players (Shibuya et al. 2019). However, no study has assessed how *gacha* was reported in news media such as newspaper stories. Therefore, this study introduces the history and regulations of *gacha* in Japan and instances of reports on *gacha* in major Japanese newspapers.

Research Questions

Based on game industries' social background in Japan, our research questions were:

RQ1: Before, during, and after the 2012 *gacha* controversy, which news frames were frequently used to report on games in major Japanese newspapers?

RQ2: Before, during, and after the 2012 *gacha* controversy, which issues were frequently reported in major Japanese newspapers?

METHODS

Time Periods and Materials of Analyses

First, we used the Japanese keywords of *gacha* and *game(s)* in Japanese newspaper archives and analyzed 233 news stories from January 2001 to December 2019 in four major Japanese newspapers (Yomiuri, Asahi, Mainichi, and Nikkei).

Categories

For RQ1 and RQ2, we created the following frameworks and issues and coded all news stories concerning whether the frame and issues were included.

(1) Business frame: (a) new game release, start and stop of distribution; (b) market size, sales amount; (c) game company stock price and stock market; (d) others

(2) Social frame: (a) high-amount of in-game purchases (as social problems); (b) protecting children and adolescents; (c) similarity to gambling; (d) money debts of game users; (e) others

(3) Consumer frame: (a) high in-game purchases (as individual complaints of game users); (b) display and accuracy of probability rates of *gacha*; (c) others

(4) Health frame: (a) pathological gaming (e.g., gaming disorder, game addiction); (b) mental benefits relating to game play (e.g., happiness); (c) physical benefits relating to game play (e.g., exercise); (d) mental problems relating to game play (e.g., depression); (e) physical problems relating to game play (e.g., difficulty in moving legs); (f) others

Reliabilities of the two authors' coding were tested using Krippendorff's Alfa (2004), which were all above .84.
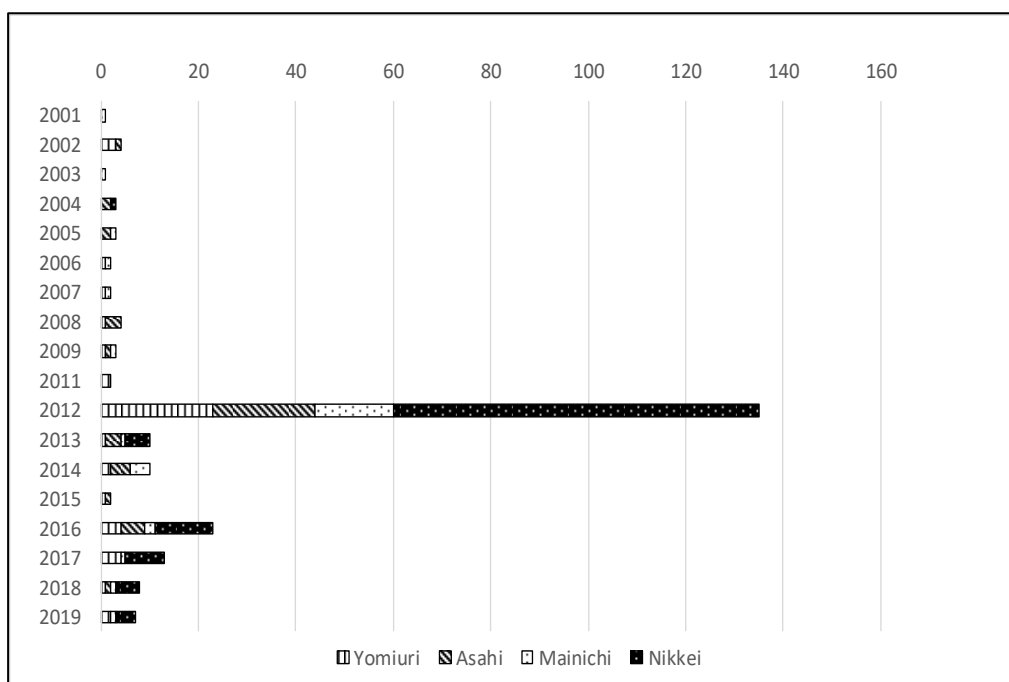
Figure 1: Frequency of four newspapers' stories on *gacha* and game(s) (January 2001–December 2019)
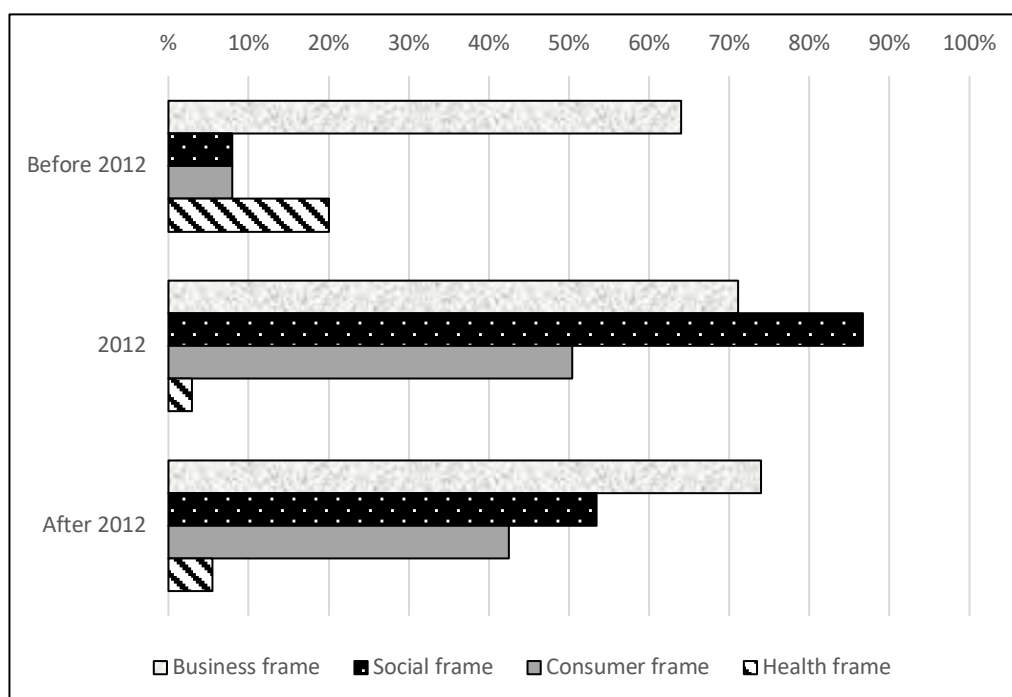
Figure 2: Ratio of newspaper stories of each frame on *gacha* and game(s) (January 2001–December 2019)

RESULTS

Among 233 news stories, the most frequently used frame was business (71%, *n*=166), and the second and third were social frame (68%, *n*=158) and consumer frame (43%, *n*=101), respectively. The health frame only comprised 6% of the total (*n*=13). The business frame was continuously used during the three time periods.

Before the 2012 *gacha* controversy, newspaper stories did not focus much on *gacha* in digital games, but mainly on it as a capsule toy. There were only 25 stories.

The number of articles increased suddenly in 2012 (Figure 1). During the 2012 *gacha* controversy, the most frequently used frame was the social frame (87%, *n*=117) (Figure 2), and the stories focused on *gacha's* similarity to gambling (76%, *n*=102) and high in-game purchases as social problems (50%, *n*=67). The articles also used the business (71%, *n*=96) and consumer (50%, *n*=68) frames.

After the *gacha* controversy, the ratio of social frame articles decreased (53%, *n*=39), and the newspapers still used the consumer frame (42%, *n*=31), focusing more on the display and accuracy of probability rates of *gacha* (22%, n=16).

DISCUSSION

The *gacha* was an innovative but controversial game system; this study shows that Japanese newspapers frequently used the business frame during the three time periods rather than only focusing on social and consumer frames. During the 2012 *gacha* controversy, *gacha*'s similarity to gambling and the high in-game purchases were emphasized by newspapers, but the focus shifted to the display and accuracy of probability rates of *gacha*, based on Japanese game companies' guidelines.

Japanese newspapers reported each *gacha* issue in response to the regulations and suggestions by the governmental organizations, initiatives by the game industry, and claims from consumers. Our analyses suggest that Japanese newspapers balanced complaints from consumers, concerns and criticism from governmental organizations, and profits and social responsibility of the game industry.

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