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PRO GRADU THESIS

“ARASHI FOR DREAM”

Idol—fan relationships in Japan

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LAMPIONÉ GOMBÁS, NOÉMI ZS.: “Arashi for Dream:” Idol—fan relationships in Japan

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The topic of this thesis is idol—fan relationships in Japan, with a specific focus on male idol groups and their female fans.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it organizes the current discourses into a unified framework. It outlines the historical roots of the idol system, and it identifies four defining characteristics of idols: their multimedia presence/intertextuality, their relations to (and departure from) youth culture, the *jimusho* system, and the conscious cultivation of fandom. The intimacy between idols and their audience is reconceptualized as a parasocial relationship, and their commercialization and the viewers’ reception experiences are analyzed in this context.

Current theories on fan—idol relationships posit that the female fan gaze is asexual. The second objective of this thesis is to challenge this notion by resituating these arguments in the wider theoretical framework of gaze and by highlighting certain methodological issues in the literature, e.g., the problems of applying a psychoanalytic model and textual analysis, that assume a textual spectator, to the study of the meaning-making processes of actual, empirical audiences.

I also conducted a thematic analysis on popular idol fanfiction to explore the potential of an active, erotically charged female gaze, and to identify certain common appeals of idols as love objects. The discussion of the findings is structured along four central themes. First, themes related to the narratives are introduced as I explore the function of fame in these stories. Second, the inherent flexibility of the celebrity image is analyzed in regards to its potential to invite fantasy. Third, I focus on the construction of the idealized masculinity of idols, and I argue that amidst the “masculinity crisis” in Japan, male idols represent a new kind masculinity where threatening aspects are omitted. Nonetheless, these images are still perceived as masculine and are sexual by their audience. Fourth, I investigate how work and dreams were presented in the dream novels, and what these texts reveal about femininity in contemporary Japanese society. I suggest that idols embody neoliberal values which center on work and consumption as primary sites for identity-formation.

Since my research analyzed dream novels that specifically target women, its scope was naturally limited to female fans of Arashi. A possible avenue for future research could be a comparison between the findings of this study and the gaze of male Arashi fans, or an in-depth comparative analysis of female and male idol fandoms in general.

Keywords: idol, parasocial relationships, female gaze, Japanese masculinities, Johnny’s Entertainment, sociology of celebrity

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Note on Japanese

This thesis uses the modified Hepburn romanization of Japanese words, and certain, specific terms are also included in their original form in the text. Japanese names are given in the Japanese traditional order with the surname followed by the given name.

"It may be in the cultural particularities of people—in their oddities—that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found."

— Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

1 Introduction

The best-selling album in the world in 2019 belongs to a band that many people have never heard of. The Japanese all-male idol group Arashi not only managed to outsell BTS, a fellow idol band from South Korea that is lately getting quite popular in the Anglosphere, they also took over Taylor Swift. Arashi's latest album, *5x20 All the BEST!! 1999-2019*, that featured some of the best hits of their twenty-year-long career in the entertainment industry, sold 3.3 million global units, which earned them the IFPI award for Top Global Album of 2019 (IFPI, 2020).

Arashi has five male members, all of whom are in their thirties: Ohno[1] Satoshi, Sakurai Shō, Aiba Masaki, Ninomiya Kazunari, and Matsumoto Jun. They formed under the infamous Johnny & Associates talent agency (henceforth: Johnny's), which is one of the most influential management companies in Japan, that has a near-monopoly on male idol groups. However, Arashi is not just a boy band, they represent the true elite tier of idols—inescapable multi-media performers whose images are promoted so blatantly through all imaginable media sites that they can be characterized as national icons. Since the band's debut in 1999, all its members became household names as a group and in their own rights as well.

Arashi's success is difficult to overestimate. They ranked first in Oricon's list of best-selling albums of the year in Japan six times in the past ten years (Oricon, 2019), and they have five albums that were certified Million by the Recording Industry Association of Japan (RIAJ, n.d.). Tickets for their concerts are notoriously hard to obtain, even though they perform at large venues such as Tokyo Dome, and news reports often cover their concerts (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 8). They are the most sought-after celebrities for commercial affiliations (Nihon Monitor, 2020), and they advertise a wide range of products on every available public surface. They were the headliners for Emperor Naruhito's enthronement celebration at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo ("Idol Group Arashi Sing at Festival", 2019), and they hosted *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, one of the most anticipated musical events of the year nine times between 2010 and 2019, with 2015 as the only exception. Yet their exact occupation is hard to pin down: they sing, they act, they host and feature in television programs, including their own variety shows, and they play an

[1] I use this version of romanization here instead of Ōno, because this is how he himself transcribes his name.

essential role in product promotions. It is often said that idols are "selling a dream"—but what exactly is this dream that is worth billions, and who is buying it?

In Arashi's recent Netflix documentary (Kobayashi et al. & Harada, 2020, translation by Brian Athey), Matsumoto laments: "sometimes I find myself wondering, 'What is that fan experiencing as she's [sic] watching us?'" This is the central topic of this thesis. I am interested mainly in not how these idols are portrayed in the media, but in how their fans see them. What are the features that make them so appealing to so many women? Is the nature of this spectatorship mostly asexual, as some of the literature suggests, or is it covertly eroticized? This thesis thus explores the relationship between male idols and their predominantly female fanbase. The discussion is divided into three main parts. Chapter 2 is titled as "The Spectacle," as it focuses on the idol as a concept: both the history and the definition of the term will be discussed. Chapter 3, "The Spectator," is centered on audiences and their relationships with idols, including a literature review on the existing theories from both the perspective of production and consumption. Finally, Chapter 4 introduces my own research on a potentially erotic gaze of female fans, which explores four common themes identified in popular idol fan fiction.

Celebrity as a concept has been theorized as social glue and as a major provider for a sense of belonging (e.g., Derrick et al., 2009), and similarly, it has been suggested that television strategically employs idols to seduce the viewers into a sense of televisual community (Lukács, 2010). The study of celebrity, however, is relevant for social sciences and Japanese studies in other regards as well. As Dyer (1991b) argues, stars also reflect the society and the time they live in—especially instabilities, contradictions, and values that are in flux at a particular moment in time. This thesis will offer an account on what exactly these values are and what idols can reveal about Japanese society.

The purpose of this study is twofold. Its ambition is partly theoretical, as it attempts to organize the existing discourses into a unified, interdisciplinary framework. While it is important to remain sensitive to the social and cultural contexts of the idol phenomena, I agree with Stevens (2011) who states that "if any Western theories are applicable to today's Japanese society, those in the area of media and communications are among them" (p. 42). By situating Japanese idols in the theoretical framework of celebrity and fan studies and parasocial relationships, I hope to contribute not only to the study of contemporary Japan, but also to the broader discourses on the relationships between media performers and their fans in general.

What I hope is distinctive about this research, in addition to its interdisciplinary nature, is its methodological approach. As I will argue, the existing studies on idols often

prioritize the production's perspective, or merely employ textual analysis on idol images, which does not account for the meaning-making processes of the audience. What is shown is not necessarily what is seen, and this is why I focus on the perspective of actual, empirical spectators in my research. I explore the potential of an active, erotically charged female gaze, and identify certain common characteristics of idols as love objects.

2 The Spectacle

2.1 A Star (System) Is Born—Or Is It Made?

Since the type of stardom idols represent is intrinsically tied to television, its development is embedded in the history of Japanese television and entertainment industry, as well as the various difficulties they faced. The interplay of socioeconomic and industrial factors, such as economic upturns and downturns, the formation and disintegration of mass audiences, and the crash and merge of competing media forged the idol into what it is today. In this chapter, I will attempt to offer a comprehensive historical overview of the evolution of idols by situating it in the context of the various crises and challenges that occurred in the Japanese entertainment industry.

Stardom itself, however, is not peculiar to Japan, and neither are the key concepts I am about to mention, such as the practice of tie-ins, multimedia promotion, or talent scouting for new faces. Therefore, I will start this chapter with a very brief, historical outline of the emergence of multimedia stars in the United States to point out common patterns and situate the idol phenomenon in a wider theoretical framework. This is relevant not only because Hollywood is still one of the most archetypal examples of a star system, but it also has served as the genesis for the field of celebrity studies in the 1970s, and common academic discourses on idols as image commodities and their role in shaping sociocultural meanings still draw heavily on frameworks borrowed from Western media and film theories. Moreover, a comparison between Japan and the U.S. is of merit since both countries have remarkably large television industries that are self-sustaining and mostly rely on domestic content, and they often had to face the same challenges, which led to the employment of similar strategies in response.

In the U.S., the most systematic and iconic phase of Hollywood stardom, the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1930s, overlapped with the Great Depression. Drastic transformations were undergoing in the film industry, e.g., the transition to talking pictures in 1930, yet the net earnings of the studios soon fell significantly. Mirroring the changes that took place in Japanese cinema in the 1960s (Chapter 2.1.1), the declining profits led to the solidification of the star system. Stars, who “by virtue of their unique appeal and drawing power stabilized rental prices” (Klaprat, 1985, as cited in McLean, 2011, p. 6), helped turn films into marketable commodities. (McLean, 2011, pp. 1–6)

Similar tendencies were observed in the music scene. Due to the market slump and the changes in people’s leisure spending habits, many smaller record labels collapsed since

they could not provide enough capital and afford risks. Consequently, the record business became an oligopoly where a small number of major companies came to dominate the market. These major companies then tended to rely on stars who came with a "built-in audience," which guaranteed decreased risks. (Frith, 1987, p. 59).

The kind of talent most sought after had changed as well, and scouting for a new type of musical performer had begun:

> Aggressive selling and a star system in the 1930s meant a new recording strategy. Companies became less concerned to exploit existing big names, more interested in building stars from scratch, as recording stars; they became less concerned to service an existing public taste than to create new tastes, to manipulate demand. Electrical recording helped here. New crooning stars like Crosby could suggest **an intimate, personal relationship with fans that worked best for domestic listeners** […]. Popular music came to describe a fixed performance, a recording with the right qualities of intimacy or personality, emotional intensity or ease. (Frith, 1987, p. 61, emphasis is mine)

These performers then would be promoted through various platforms, actors would release albums and singers would appear on the screen, leading to the emergence of multimedia stardom. Frith explains the recession's impact on the emergence of cross-media appearances as a promotional strategy:

> In the 1930s the recording star system was dependent on a tie-up with film and radio (hence the arrival of Bing Crosby[2]—again, Decca was the first company to realize how valuable he was). But in the 1980s, again in the time of recession, we've seen very similar strategies being followed—an emphasis on a few superstars at the expense of the mass of groups just getting by, those stars in turn being marketed via films and film soundtracks and, more especially, with video promotion on MTV. (p. 61)

Indeed, similarly to Japan's tie-up boom (Chapter 2.1.3), the 1980s in the U.S. also saw an unprecedented degree of corporate alliances. *Genesis* became the house band of a brewery and released a hit single based on the commercial's "image song;" Pepsi-Cola entered promotional agreements with Michael Jackson and Tina Turner. In the same period, television stars would enter the music industry, e.g. Don Johnson and Bruce Willis

[2] Bing Crosby is widely known as the first American multimedia star. He was a singer, actor, and songwriter who achieved legendary popularity in radio, recordings, and motion pictures from 1931 to 1954.

released their first pop singles in the 1980s, signaling the thinning lines between the music, television, and advertisement industries. (Lull, 1987, p. 22)

In addition, television networks in both countries had similar problems to face. Audience fragmentation occurred in the U.S. around the same time as in Japan, in the mid-1980s. As a response, the U.S. TV industry employed parallel strategies: niche targeting, horizontal integration, and a growing emphasis on style over content. Young, style-conscious women emerged as a vital target group in this decade, and networks were pressured to merge their program content with advertising, leading to the prevalence of branded entertainment (Lukács, 2010, p. 14). Many of the currently ongoing challenges are also shared: media convergence, globalization, the growing popularity of streaming services, and changing consumption patterns pose a threat to both industries.

A more detailed comparison of these industries in the U.S. is beyond the scope of this thesis or its author's expertise, however, there is one additional point I would like to emphasize here regarding the origins of stardom. While the star system as an institution was readily capitalized by the film and recording industry, it is important to reflect upon the production/consumption dialectic of mass communications here, i.e., whether media makes an audience or audience makes the media. Are stars a phenomenon of production or a phenomenon of consumption? Are stars made, or are they discovered?

The wording in the quote about Bing Crosby above, where it states that Decca was the first company to "realize" his value, is already a telltale: it implies that the potential was not "made" by the production side, it was already there, ready to be exploited. What becomes evident from accounts on the beginnings of the star system in Hollywood is that it was originally driven by the audience's innate desire for "intimacy" (a frequently reoccurring key concept throughout my research and this thesis), and the industry only recognized its benefits subsequentially. At first, producers resisted even the identification of performers in films. As Holmes (2000) notes:

> The star system was central to the economics of moviemaking in the United States during the studio era. Its adoption in Hollywood had not been a straightforward process, though. To the apostles of scientific management, the institution of stardom was an outmoded relic of the legitimate theatre, a pre-industrial anomaly in a system of production that was increasingly geared towards maximising efficiency and minimising unnecessary expenditure and they had continued to rail against it even after it had emerged as a key weapon in the struggle for market dominance. (p. 98)

The main catalyst for change was, indeed, public demand. The audience started to single out certain performers and wanted to put a name to these familiar faces, so they started to give performers nicknames (such as “the Biograph Girl” to Florence Lawrence, who is frequently referred to as the first movie star), and they were eager to know in advance which motion pictures would feature them. This was then recognized by a few independent producers as an opportunity to compete with major studios, as it guaranteed a predictable demand which good scripts and even genres could not offer (Dyer, 1998, p. 9). Soon studios discovered that “the most efficient way to lure customers into an unfamiliar story was to put a familiar face on the poster” (Perlstein, 2014, p. 342), and actors had become not only the most important means of differentiating one film from another, but also the key to attracting outside capital (Holmes, 2000, p. 99).

This is important to underline because analyzing Japanese idols merely as phenomena of production is still predominant in the existing literature, as I will discuss in Chapter 2.3, and the active role of the audience is often dismissed. While it certainly holds true that the production of idols is highly systematized and these performers are imposed on the audience by the media to a certain degree, it is important to remember throughout the following chapters that people seem to be drawn to stars innately, thus the agencies are catering to already existing inner desires. As Dyer (1998) writes:

> Looking at the stars from the point of view of production puts the emphasis on the film-makers (including the economic structures within which they work and the medium they use) who make stars, or cause them to exist. However, it has been argued that a more determining force in the creation of stars is the audience—that is, the consumers—rather than the producers of media texts. (p. 17)

2.1.1 1950s: The Big Bang (the Clash of Postwar Cinema and Television)

The birth of the idol is intertwined with the advent of Japanese television in 1953, which is correspondingly concomitant with the post-war boom of the motion picture industry in Japan. The 1950s are considered to be the second golden age for Japanese cinema: factors such as postwar inflation and restrictions on foreign movies helped the domestic industry flourish and the studio system reach its peak. Classics such as Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashōmon* (1950) and Honda Ishirō’s *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, 1954) reached significant success both nationally and internationally, the former winning awards such

as the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and an Academy Honorary Award, and, as a consequence, Japanese films were now produced with export in mind. (Gerow, 2011, p. 219)

Television broadcasting began only in 1953, significantly later than in the United States. Initially, there were only two stations which developed and represented two different business models. NHK *(Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai)*, the public channel, mostly relied on government subsidies and receiver fees, while NTV *(Nihon Terebi)* was selling commercial time. This meant that in these early years, NHK's growth was impeded by the high price of television sets, which remained unaffordable for the majority of population. NTV, on the other hand, developed a strategy that relied on multiplying the number of viewers in public places: they set up large-screen televisions in highly frequented locations such as train stations and intersections, which meant that television viewing at this time was mostly a social activity enjoyed outside of the home. (Lukács, 2010, pp. 31–32; Duus, 2011, pp. 19–20; Gerow, 2011, p. 221)

In the beginning, television networks relied heavily on domestic films studios for content, because they lacked both the facilities and the personnel to produce their own programs. However, in 1956 a rupture occurred in the relations of the two industries, as Japan Motion Picture Association decided to foreclose television's broadcasting rights for domestically produced movies, and actors and actresses were now bound to seek permission to appear in television programs[3]. These restrictions had three major consequences for television networks. Firstly, they had to increasingly rely on imported programs for content, mainly from the United States (e.g., *I Love Lucy*, broadcast in 1957, or *Ben Casey*, broadcast in 1958) (Ivy, 1993, p. 249; Lukács, 2010, pp. 32–33; Gerow, 2011, p. 221). Secondly, television started to develop its own, distinct style (e.g., centrality of close-ups) and programs (Gerow, 2011, p. 221). Television dramas became recognized as a distinguished art form for the first time due to the popular and critical success of television dramas such as *Watashi wa Kai ni Naritai* (*I Want to Become a Shellfish*, 1958) (Schilling, 2008; Lukács, 2010, p. 35). Thirdly, television was forced to start producing its own talent, as theater alone could not satisfy the growing demand (Lukács, 2010, p. 45).

While in the 1950s cinema remained the primary source of entertainment for the masses, the tides turned in the 1960s, and the lines of influence would soon reverse. 1958

[3] Lukács attributes this measure to the crisis of cinema's declining popularity (Lukács, 2010, p. 32), however, the film industry at this point was not yet struggling: movie attendance was still increasing and reached its peak in 1958, five years later. (NHK Digital Museum, n.d. b; Gerow, 2011, pp. 220–221)

marked the peak of film attendance, however, factors such as overproduction on the film studios' part, the growing popularity of television, and demographic changes such as suburbanization led to a drastic fall in film production levels in 1959 (Kofujita, 1983, as cited in Howard, 2014, p. 52; Gerow, 2011, p. 220). Meanwhile, television sets became one of the so-called "three sacred treasures" *(sanshu no jingi)*[4] as the mass production of television sets brought down their price significantly. By 1962, about half of the population had a television set (Ivy, 1993, p. 248; Duus, 2011); by the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics, this number was close to 88% (Lukács, 2010, p. 32); and by 1970, nearly every household had a television (Stevens, 2011, p. 38.; Duus, 2011). As TV sets became more affordable, television conquered the domestic sphere, and became part of the family home.

The disintegration of the post-war film studio system and television's newly established position as a leading medium during the 1960s led to significant changes in both the characteristics of television programming and the structure of the entertainment industry in general. Firstly, the radical upsurge of broadcasting time expanded the demand for content production (Lukács, 2010, p. 36). Consequently, as television networks increasingly developed their own programming, the domestication of program production had begun, and this practice has continued to this day. In 1971, the ratio of imported content was estimated to be around 10% on commercial networks, and 1-4% on public channels. By 1981, imported programming only accounted for 4.9% of the total broadcast time, and Japan has continued to remain a very moderate importer of television programming ever since. Japanese television had thus become a self-sustaining industry that overwhelmingly relies on domestic content, which is a prerequisite for the success of idols and the *tarento* system. (Hagiwara, 1998, p. 223, Tunstall, 2006, p. 20, Lukács, 2010, p. 13, 33.)

Secondly, cinema's decline had a huge impact on movie stardom as well. In 1963, cinema resumed the practice of subcontracting their talents to television, and the ban on selling films to television networks was also lifted (Lukács, 2010, p. 33). While popular actors' star value had increased in worth, less prominent performers were compelled to reestablish their careers in theaters or on television (Kofujita, 1983, as cited in Howard, 2014, pp. 51–52). Now that television continued to thrive and the tables had turned,

[4] The three sacred treasures—the television, the refrigerator, and the washing machine—were considered as the signifiers of middle-class, since the majority of Japanese households were expected to own these items in the 1960s. The expression is a joking reference to three sacred treasures of the Imperial Household, the Imperial Regalia of Japan: the sword, the mirror, and the jewel. This concept has later evolved into "The Tree Cs" referring to color televisions, cars, and coolers (air-conditioners).

television personnel, e.g. directors, would enter film (Gerow, 2011, p. 221). Nowadays, Japanese television networks usually own the facilities where their programming is made, and even when they order longer narrative films from independent production studios, they will assign their own producers to oversee the project (Lukács, 2010, p. 13).

This is the context where the stage for a radically new type of stardom was set, one that was inherently tied to television as a medium and was cultivated by talent management agencies—many of which were founded in this period and would later come to dominate the field. For instance, Hori Production, known today as Horipro Inc., was established in 1960, while Johnny & Associates (often referred to simply as Johnny's) was founded in 1962[5]. The exact methods and strategies of these agencies will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter, however, it is practical to note here as a preliminary remark that the flow of talent from television to cinema discussed above had carried on and later also extended to idols. As cinema continued to struggle and television's impact continued to grow in the following decade, idols entered the movie scene as well. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, more and more so-called idol films were produced as co-operations between these talent agencies and big studios such as Tōhō, e.g. *Blue Jeans Memory (Burū jīnzū memorī,* Kawazaki Yoshisuke, 1981), featuring Tanokin Trio, a male idol group managed by Johnny's, as headliners (Howard, 2014, pp. 52–53).

2.1.2 1960s and 70s: Television as a Mass Medium and the Idol Boom

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, in a period that was characterized by steady economic growth and a Fordist mode of production, mass commodities, including television sets, were available to the majority of the population, and mass media became a "common hearth where people gathered" (Lukács, 2010, p. 21). Post-war mass media played an important role in the formation and circulation of the concept of "national culture"[6], as it established its viewers as members of a united national community. Certain programs would even reach the status of a national rite, for instance, NHK *Kōhaku Uta Gassen (NHK Red and White Song Competition)* is an annual television special that has

[5] This is sometimes listed as 1967 (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 317; Aoyagi, 2005, p. 6; Lukács, 2010, p. 219), but the agency launched its first group, named *Johnnies*, already in 1962 (e.g., Fukue, 2009; Campion, 2005; Janīzu Kenkyūkai, 2014, pp. 8–9) The origin of the confusion might be that *Four Leaves*, a fairly famous Johnny's group, debuted in 1967, however, this was not the first band the agency managed.

[6] As Darling-Wolf points out, the concept of national culture is a fairly recent development in most countries. In Japan, it can be traced back to the 1868 Meiji restoration. (Darling-Wolf, 2000, p. 138)

aired every New Year's Eve since 1953[7], so for almost 70 years. The program features the most successful music artists of the year who compete in two groups, red (for female singers/bands) and white (for male singers/bands). *Kōhaku* used to be the most-watched Japanese television show of the year, the 1963 broadcast reached an all-time high, 81.4 rating[8] (Video Research Ltd., n.d.).

In these years of uniform viewing, when certain programs could expect to directly reach over half of the nation, Japanese television established itself as a national medium. As Gerow puts it, television "wore the mantle of the nation" (Gerow, 2011, p. 222) that united the citizenry by televising public spectacles such Crown Prince Akihito's wedding in 1959 or the 1964 Olympics. Themes of national, local, cultural, and racial unity were central to the programming, and television presented itself as a bridge between the diverse regions of Japan that nonetheless constituted a single, harmonious whole with Tokyo as its heart (Painter, 1993). People "could now consume the nation like they did the ads on TV" (Gerow, 2011, p. 222)—from the comfort of their homes.

Japanese society itself was also depicted as a homogenous unit, and popular representations of an all-middle-class nation had entered the public discourse. Despite this middle-class society remaining more of a social construct rather than actual reality, the media attempted to unite the nation under the umbrella of middle-class values by valorizing selflessness and the collective effort toward economic growth. (Ivy, 1993; Aoyagi, 2005, pp. 264–265; Lukács, 2010, p. 6, pp. 173–174)

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, family served as the central unit of television, both as a target audience and as a central theme. A great example of this is the genre of the home drama, that developed into a full-blown mass commodity throughout the early 1960s, with a peak in 1964 (Lukács, 2010, pp. 36–37). Home dramas attempted to appeal to the entire family by portraying multiple generations belonging to different age groups. While the fictional families featured in these programs were patricentric in the beginning (which was a common formula in the imported American shows that were broadcast in Japan at the time), the newer home dramas increasingly depicted the mother as the center of the family. Not only was this more in sync with the social realities, but it also marked a shift towards the femininization of the genre, as women, especially housewives, emerged as a

[7] *Kōhaku* was first broadcast (on radio) in 1951, but the first three shows were not aired on December 31.

[8] Television programming today can no longer realistically obtain such high ratings, however, *Kōhaku* remained one of the most anticipated musical events of the year and receiving an invitation to participate in it is still considered to be a reputable milestone in any musician's career. The fact that Arashi was chosen as the white team's host nine times between 2010 and 2019 (with 2015 as the only exception) is a testament to the group's soaring popularity.

vital target audience for marketers (Lukács, 2010, pp. 35–37). The program schedules and visual styles were also tailored to suit the family timetable, with afternoon talk shows targeting the distracted housewives and late-night news or sport programs geared towards the salarymen, epitomizing the fundamental pillars of the ideal middle-class family (Gerow, 2011, p. 222).

The mid-1960s saw the emergence of a new target audience in addition to housewives: teenagers. Formerly, the genre of *kayōkyoku* (the standard pop music in the Shōwa period) was considered to be inappropriate for children and adolescents due to its images and lyrics that were preoccupied with love (Kitagawa, 1991, p. 306; Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 58; Aoyagi, 2000, p. 316). However, this had changed with the Group Sounds movement, which was the first attempt of homegrown commercial pop music to specifically address teenagers. For instance, *The Johnnys*, a band of four adolescent boys which was the very first group managed by Johnny Kitagawa and Johnny & Associates, first established their agency's long-lasting influence in the business when they performed on *Kōhaku* in 1965 (Janīzu Kenkyūkai, 2014, p. 19). *The Johnnys* disbanded in 1967, but the gap they left behind was immediately filled with *Four Leaves (Fō Rībusu)*, the next Johnny's group drawing on the very same formula: a group of good-looking boy singers who do not play instruments but include dance routines in their performances instead; and this legacy has continued to this day. The Group Sounds boom itself, on the other hand, did not last long and had mostly faded by 1969 (Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 58), yet it had established youth culture's potential as a profitable market, which was further exploited by the idol industry during the next decade.

It was in the 1970s that the idol industry truly shifted into high gear: between 1971 and 1975, approximately 700 idols were reported to have debuted in Japan (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 5). Promising talents were scouted through auditions, some of these local, some of these televised. Of particular importance was NTV's *Sutā Tanjō (A Star is Born)*, that ran from 1971 to 1983 and became the flagship of singing contests in Japan (Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 59; Aoyagi, 2005, p. 6). Rather than simply taking advantage of the existing fame of actors and actresses, the idol agencies' focus was on creating it by recruiting brand new talent with some star potential, and then subsequently developing them into multi-media entertainers. These agencies gained significant influence by further infusing their talents, originally from the music field, into the world of television, as these young singers were promoted via cross-media appearances in prime-time music programs such as *The Best Ten.* The era called "idol boom" had thus begun, when the lack of acting

talent was coupled with overexposure and smart marketing (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 316; Lukács, 2010, p. 45).

Idols represented a whole new domain of stardom because they pose themselves not as extraordinary professionals but as one of their audience, the archetypal boys and girls next door, who are willing to compensate for their lack of outstanding talent with eagerness, hard work, and bright smiles. They are good-looking and can sing and dance, but only at a level that does not intimidate their audience. This way, the perceived distance between the performers and their fans is so small that their positions become interchangeable, and teen idols come to represent stars well within reach: since they are one of us, they symbolize what you too can aspire to be as an ordinary person with some hard work; therefore, their success is your potential success. (Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 59, Aoyagi, 2000, pp. 310–312)

Early representatives of female idols in the 1970s include collaboration projects such as the new generation of *Sannin Musume (Three Young Girls)*[9]: Amachi Mari, Minami Saori, and Koyanagi Rumiko; or the *Chūsan Trio (Trio of Nine-grade Schoolgirls)*: Yamaguchi Momoe, Mori Masako, and Sakurada Junko; and other group acts such as *Candies* and *Pink Lady*. On the boys' side, *Four Leaves* stayed quite popular until their disbandment in 1978, and Johnny and Associates also reached significant success with the promotion of solo artists such as Gō Hiromi—who was labelled as one of the *shin gosanke (New Big Three)* along with Saijō Hideki and Noguchi Gorō—and singer Toyokawa Jō. (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 317; Aoyagi, 2005, p. 6; Galbraith and Karlin, 2012, p. 5)

2.1.3 1980s: Bubble Economy and the Golden Age of Idols

The previous section focused on how television became a national mass medium during the early 1960s, and how economic growth and uniform viewing had led to the emergence of mass audiences and new target groups. It likewise had major implications for the programming since mass audiences were concomitant with mass consumption. Business interests increasingly enjoyed priority over the contents of programming and the artistic freedom of the producers to the point where commercials often became more compelling than the actual programming by the late 1960s (Lukács, 2010, p. 35; Gerow, 2011, p. 222–223). Television took over as the leading medium in advertising in 1975,

[9] The original *Sannin Musume* are Yukimura Izumi, Eri Chiemi, and Misora Hibari, who were the most successful female singers in the early postwar era. Each of them had their own, separate careers, but they collaborated on some creative projects including songs and a series of movies.

surpassing newspapers (Lukács, 2010, p. 32), and the commercialization of television had further intensified in the following decades.

Japanese television relies on two essential components: advertisements and the celebrity system, and these two became inextricably intertwined in the 1980s as information and consumption took on a central role in the thriving economy of post-industrial Japan (Gerow, 2011, pp. 222–223; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012b). Since consumer choices were increasingly influenced by the affective meanings and communicative functions of a product rather than its actual value or quality, companies realized that branding was a more lucrative business strategy than simply manufacturing goods (Lukács, 2010, p. 42; Stevens, 2011; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012b pp. 5–6). Celebrities are invaluable assets to the advertising industry partly because they can be a powerful tool for product proliferation. The promotional potential of idols became the fundamental tenet of the so-called image economy, which will be thoroughly scrutinized in Chapter 3.3, but here, I will remark upon the historical origins of this system by discussing a couple of examples of its earliest archetype that became prevalent in the 1980s: the tie-up commercial[10].

Cosmetic companies were among the first who started to put more emphasis on the songs used in their commercials when targeting female consumers starting from 1975, which marked the start of tightening relationships between the advertising and music industries (Ogawa, 1988, p. 149.; Stevens, 2011, p. 44.). This practice was elevated to the next level in 1978 with Shiseido's autumn campaign, which featured a song by popular singer Horiuchi Takao. This collaboration is considered as the first prototype of the so-called tie-up advertisement because it involves an explicitly stated relationship with an already known singer, as the song's title *(Kimi no Hitomi wa 10 000 Boruto)* was used as the slogan of Shiseido's campaign creating further links between the music and the product. The concept proved to be mutually beneficial for both parties, since the single itself became a mega-hit as well, and it was leading the Oricon singles chart for three weeks (Ugaya, 2005, pp. 69–70; Stevens, 2011, p. 44). The notable success of this campaign spurred a tie-up boom in the 1980s, when these commercials matured into a distinctive genre that has been overwhelmingly popular in Japan ever since (see Chapter 3.3).

[10] A tie-up is a distinct form of celebrity endorsement—which have been prevalent in Japan since the 1970s (Kilburn, 1998, p. 20)—in the sense that by the creation and cross-media circulation of an image song *(imēji songu)* it specifically links the music, television, and consumer product industries together (Stevens, 2011, p. 38).

In addition to the commercials, television programming itself also became increasingly centered on idols in the 1980s. New formats of programming were broadcasted that relied heavily on the circulation of celebrity, such as variety shows, talk shows, and prime-time music shows.[11] The prestige of these programs depended not solely on their ratings, but also on which talents they were able to feature (Gerow, 2011, p. 223), thus idols became the "currency" of Japanese television (Yoshimoto, 1996, as cited in Gerow, 2011, p. 223). Since celebrities were concurrently in charge of generating profits by the promotion of goods while they also remained a major source of pleasure for the viewers, the line between entertainment and advertisements started to blur.

A new domain of popular culture has emerged as idols became "a nationwide craze" (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 316) to the point where the death of the star and the triumph of the idol was declared (Nakamori, 2007, p. 9), hence, the 1980s became known as "the golden age of idols" *(aidoru no ōgon jidai)* (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012b, p. 5). Popular artists from this period include Matsuda Seiko, Sakai Noriko, Koizumi Kyōko, and Nakamori Akina among the female performers, and Tahara Toshihiko, Nomura Yoshio, and Kondō Masahiko (also known as the *Tanokin Trio*) among the male artists. Among idols groups, e.g., Hikaru Genji, Shōnentai, and Onyanko Club were well-known and well-liked.

2.1.4 1990s and Beyond: Fragmented Audiences and Idol Ice Age?

With Emperor Akihito's accedence to the throne in 1989, the Shōwa era ended and Heisei began. This coincided with the pinnacle of the economic bubble as asset prices peaked and stock prices reached record highs in Japan. However, within three years, the economic bubble burst, and the Lost Decade began. The Japanese entertainment industry faced a drastic turning point in other regards as well. *Kayōkyoku* as a genre died along with its queen, Misora Hibari, in 1989, and the music category was split and labeled as J-pop or *enka* from that point on. The popularity of idols had faded as well as audiences grew tired of the television shows they featured in and, as a consequence, several of them were cancelled (Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 61; Matsutani, 2009). Many performers had thus found themselves in a difficult position since their commercial value declined along with the economic recession. The media and many industry experts concluded that the days of the idol fad were over, therefore this period between the late 1980s and mid-1990s

[11] Many of these programs, such as *Hit Studio Deluxe* and *The Best Ten*, got cancelled during the so-called "idol ice age" that started at the end of the 1980s. However, there are also notable exceptions, e.g. *Morita Kazuyoshi Hour: Waratte Iitomo!* that ran from 1982 to 2014.

was coined as the “idol ice age” or “the winter time of idols” (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 318; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012b, p. 24).

There was, however, one notable exception here that ended up turning the tide.

While this pessimistic assessment was certainly valid for the majority of female idols at the time, it is notable that the so-called idol ice age actually coincided with the emergence of one of the brightest stars of Japanese idol history. SMAP, an acronym for “Sports Music Assemble People,” is the name of a Johnny’s all-male pop group. The six members (all aged between 10 and 15 at the time) started out as back dancers for the fairly popular roller-skating group Hikaru Genji in 1987, but their success far outshone their predecessors—or any Japanese pop group before them, male or female. SMAP’s impact on the entertainment industry is difficult to overstate. Throughout their 28-year-long career, they sold over 35 000 000 records (Oricon, 2015), and their weekly variety show was the most watched television show in Japan for years. Not only did they manage to revive the idol business and turned Johnny’s “from a talent agency into the gatekeeper of Japanese entertainment in general” (St. Michel, 2019), they have reached the status of a “national treasure,” while receiving significant success outside of Japan as well. What made this possible in an era when idols were already considered passé?

I argue that the key to SMAP’s unprecedented success was twofold. Firstly, the band represents a turning point in the concept of idols that was necessitated by the crisis of the industry. While in the beginning SMAP was simply following in the footsteps of other Johnny’s bands and originally presented themselves as cute, young boys who sang and danced, the agency realized that this strategy was not going to be viable in the already-matured idol market, and they needed to pivot. As Johnny Kitagawa, the founder of Johnny’s, explained in an interview, he was “not very interested in records,” because he realized that focusing solely on music was bad for the artist (McClure, 1996, p. 77). Keeping in line with this, SMAP was even less of a music group than its predecessors since it started to heavily focus on television and neglect the stage. Johnny allegedly asked local television stations to feature the members in their shows and dramas (Oi, 2012), and the group would start to regularly appear on television screen straight after their formation in 1988. They established themselves as television personalities and actors first and foremost, and it took them three years to officially release any music—their first single in 1991 came out only after their first concert tour.

This new strategy granted SMAP another major advantage, which brings us to the second point. Due to their wide-ranging television presence, SMAP succeeded in expanding their audience beyond teenage girls, the typical target group of male idols. This

proved to be essential in the changing media environment, where audience fragmentation increasingly undermined the efficacy of mass marketing. In the following, the wider context and reasons of this phenomena will be explored.

Technological developments tend to radically and rapidly change not only the media landscape, but also the way people interact with media content. As it was mentioned before, when TV sets became more affordable due to mass production, television moved from public spaces into the domestic sphere, and later on households would own multiple sets. Television viewing itself has become an increasingly solitary and passive action (Gerow, 2011, pp. 221–223; Hirata et al., 2011, pp. 5–6), and the shift from a relatively uniform programming to a multichannel one had led to the depreciation of the mass viewing of national spectacles. Long gone were the days when hit dramas such as *Oshin* could boast an annual average audience share of 52.6% (NHK Digital Museum, n.d. a), and family-centric programs e.g. home dramas, which used to be a mass commodity, lost their appeal.

The middle-of-the-road approach of targeting the mass middle-class was thus no longer profitable for marketers. Market fragmentation had been a pressing issue since the mid-1980s, but coupled with the economic recession in the ‘90s, it posed a crucial crisis for the industry. As an outcome, television compensated for the decreasing reach by switching to the targeting of narrowly defined audiences instead, with a special focus on a niche with a well-above-average purchasing power: young women. “Female desire has become a lucrative business” (Darling-Wolf, 2003, p. 285), and the fifteen- to twenty-five-year-old female demographic group have been a prime target of television and advertisements ever since (Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 63; Darling-Wolf, 2004c, p. 287; Lukács, 2010, p. 38, p. 93).

This shift is evident in the concept of the so-called trendy dramas, which were created to specifically cater to women from the ages of eighteen to thirty-four, but their success indicated that they appealed to an even wider audience. Due to its unexpected popularity, Fuji reserved a program slot exclusively for this genre in 1988. Other networks promptly followed, and it is estimated that in the 1990s more than 550 trendy dramas were broadcast on television. (Lukács, 2010, p. 38)

Lukács offers a thorough analysis (2010) on both the sociocultural and industrial context of these serials in her book about Japanese television in the 1990s, but here I will focus on one aspect of their argument about the role of idols. These dramas marked a shift from plot-centered to lifestyle-driven entertainment in the sense that they primarily served as an incentive for individualized consumption rather than offering a compelling

storyline. Since idols act as ambassadors for trends and brands, they became indispensable to the program production and were seen as a form of capital investment, while concurrently they were also the main source of pleasure for the viewers. They became so central to the success of these serials that Lukács concluded that trendy dramas "are just as much about fictive characters as about the *tarento*[12] who personify them" (Lukács, 2010, p. 43). They further remark:

> Once *tarento* become the center of program production, they have a tendency to overwhelm and even subsume the content and the format of programming. A result of this tendency is that the boundaries between televisual genres are breaking down. Although genres used to be classified according to the primary functions of television broadcasting (information, education, and entertainment), in parallel with the growing importance of the *tarento* in program production these functions started collapsing into each other, giving birth to new, composite genres such as edu-tainment, info-tainment, and adver-tainment in which the *tarento* were indispensable components. For instance, the *tarento* are essential to the subtle blurring of commercials and dramas into each other, resulting in the commercialization of dramas and the concomitant dramatization of commercials. (pp. 50–51, italicization by me)

In other words, in this era a new media economy was formed with idols and the *tarento* system at its heart and acting as its main organizing force. Idols succeeded in connecting formerly unrelated markets and media institutions, and thus established an interconnected system that is based upon the circulation of celebrity, a phenomenon which Galbraith and Karlin (2012b) call the "self-referentiality of the Japanese mass media." In addition to their potential to boost sales and promote brands, idols also helped networks to make domestic programming more appealing and competitive vis-à-vis transnational media, a facet which is increasingly important in the age of accelerated globalization.

The end of the 1990s thus saw the renaissance of idols and the triumph of Johnny's. Not only did the agency secure a spot in the top five talent agencies (that cumulatively provide 50% of the guest list on top music programs), Johnny's managed to effectively secure a monopoly on male idol groups (Marx, 2012, p. 46, p. 49). A long list of successful boy bands such as KinKi Kids, Tokio, and V6 followed in the footsteps of

[12] Lukács uses the general term *tarento* throughout their book to refer to multimedia entertainers and defines idols as their teenage equivalents, but in this thesis adult performers are included in the idol category. For instance, Lukács identifies Kimura Takuya (a member of SMAP) as an example of a *tarento*, whom this thesis labels as an idol (see Chapter 2.2 for further clarification).

SMAP and debuted under the agency's patronage in the mid-1990s. Arashi was formed in the autumn of 1999, at the threshold of the new millennium, and in the 2000s, the line-up for exclusively male Johnny's talent continued with KAT-TUN, Kanjani8, Tackey & Tsubasa, NEWS, and Hey! Say! JUMP. Meanwhile, the teen girl idol formula was revived with the formation of Morning Musume in 1997, and the idol fad skyrocketed once again in the 2000s with the formation of AKB48 and Momoiro Clover Z, iconic representatives of what the media has labelled as the "idol warring period."

To conclude, this chapter so far discussed the emergence of a new kind of multimedia stardom in Japan and situated it in the historical context of the disintegration of the post-war film studio system and the advent of television. While Japanese television in its early years heavily relied on borrowing actors and actresses from theater and film studios, it was soon forced to create its own stars. Idols have since evolved to become "all-powerful currencies whose circulation produced a culture of televisual intimacy" (Lukács, 2010, p. 45) and represent a distinct breed of celebrity which is claimed to be unique to Japan (as it is further defined in the next chapter). Historically, movie stars have always cultivated relationships with other media to promote themselves as well, both in and outside of Japan. Idols, however, have managed to elevate this practice to an unprecedented level by creating profitable links and tie-ins between previously unrelated markets and media institutions, thus becoming indispensable to the contemporary, increasingly interconnected media economy.

2.2 What Is an Idol?

When Ninomiya Kazunari, a member of Arashi, was asked about his debut in Hollywood film at a press conference, he started his reply with firmly stating that he was not an actor. Strictly speaking, he said, his profession was singing and dancing in a group with four other people (Berlinale: Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, 2007, 17:12). This was a curious statement considering that this interview took place at the Berlin Film Festival, where he was invited to due to his role in the critically acclaimed, Academy Award-winning film *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and he was sitting next to director Clint Eastwood and actor Watanabe Ken as he spoke. Ninomiya himself had had already several years of experience—and won a long list of awards—as an actor in Japan by the time. He certainly met the criteria—so why the differentiation? And if he is not an actor, then what exactly is his profession?

While idols are often argued to represent a special type of celebrity that is peculiar to Japan (and had subsequently spread to East Asia), the definition of the term is not clear-cut. Hence in this chapter, I will organize the current discourses on the concept into a unified framework of four defining characteristics: idols' multimedia presence/intertextuality, their relations to (and possible departure from) youth culture, the agency system, and finally, I argue for including a new aspect in the characterization: the conscious cultivation of fandom. One important criterion for this framework was to only include attributes that both female and male idols share. Moreover, since the idol concept was adapted to other East Asian countries, most notably South Korea in the 1990s, the applicability of these characteristics to idols in different cultural contexts was also considered.

In this thesis, idols are understood as a distinct subcategory of *tarento*, which is a blanket term for television personalities in Japan. The expression originates from the English word "talent"[13], yet ironically, *tarento* are often characterized by their lack of talent: they are presented as ordinary people who just happen to be ubiquitous in media, especially television. The concept is comparable to historian Daniel Boorstin's definition of celebrity: "a person who is well-known for his [*sic*] well-knownness"[14]. *Tarento* and celebrity therefore form a stark contrast with classic stars, who are considered to possess some sort of extraordinary talent that sets them apart from the crowd. Correspondingly, idols are often claimed to have no talent at all (a statement which will be addressed a bit more closely in the next section). Yet they are differentiated from other *tarento*, for example, both Johnny's performers and the members of AKB48 are specifically referred to as idols. Why?

Idol (*aidoru*) as a word first entered circulation in Japan with a 1963 French movie, *Cherchez l'idole*, which was released in Japan under the title *Aidoru o Sagasu* (In Search for an Idol) (Kofujita, 1983, as cited in Howards, 2014, p. 51; Aoyagi, 2005, p. 4). The movie featured French pop singers including Sylvie Vartan, who became fairly popular in Japan. This already indicates one important attribute: idols are multi-media performers, they sing and act. Dent-Spargo (2017, p. 184), for instance, defines idols as "media personalities who act, sing and dance professionally," echoing Ninomiya's self-

[13] Here I kept the romanized transcription of the Japanese word in order to avoid confusion, because I use "talent" in its general meaning as well throughout this thesis. Since "idol" is a more specific term that I use strictly in the context of the Japanese entertainment media, I deemed that no such differentiation was needed, so I use its anglicized version instead of *aidoru*.

[14] Many television programs, especially game and variety shows, rely on these performers for content, and the category encompasses a wide range of subtypes e.g., ex-sportsmen, comedians, and even foreigners. For a more detailed analysis of the so-called *tarento* system, see e.g., Painter, 1993 or Lukács, 2010.

description quoted in the first paragraph. Moreover, Darling-Wolf (2000, p. 152) further noted that the typical pattern for idols is to first and foremost establish themselves as singers, and only then move on to acting, and not the other way around.

Hence, one self-evident way of characterizing these performers is through their activities, which extend well beyond singing and acting. For instance, Darling-Wolf (2004b, p. 525) defines idols as "popular media celebrities typically involved in multiple areas of the entertainment industry," and Ninomiya himself is a great example of this. He is recognized as a singer and songwriter, an actor (including film, television, and theater productions) and voice actor, a presenter and radio host. Since his debut in Arashi over twenty years ago, the band released over twenty albums and close to sixty singles; they starred together as a group in two movies and two dramas; they produced a dozen variety shows together (many of which aired during prime-time); in addition to hosting several prestigious programs such as the annual telethon *24-Hour Television* or *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, all this on top of their regular appearances on variety shows, advertisements, and other programs, including the news. Apart from his group's activities, Ninomiya himself has starred in dozens of dramas and a long list of movies, while hosting his own variety (*Nino san*, NTV) and radio show (*Bay Storm*, Bay FM). Arashi and its members are truly everywhere, they epitomize what Schilling (1997, p. 232, as cited in Darling-Wolf, 2003, p. 75) meant when they compared SMAP to an invading army. This extreme cross-media presence is often labelled as the "intertextuality" of idols and Japanese media in general in the literature, e.g., in Darling-Wolf, 2000 and 2004a; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012.

In addition to their multimedia omnipresence, idols are often conceptualized in connection with adolescence and youth culture. Lukács (2010) for instance simply equates idols with teenage *tarento* (p. 56), and some define idols as "young performers targeted at teenagers" (Brasor & Tsubuku, 1997, p. 55) or as "young performers who sing, pose for photographs, and appear frequently in the media" (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 4). Aoyagi (2004) describes idols as "adolescent personalities […] who are commodified as public role models in adolescent fashions and lifestyles" (p. 144), and contends that their primary roles are representing the experiences of youth and providing teenagers with a social space for socialization (ibid, p. 146). This characterization, however, is somewhat outdated in my opinion. While it is certainly true that idols originally emerged as part of youth culture in the 1960s and used to enjoy an overbearingly teenage following, I am about to argue here that since then a conceptual shift has taken place which affected not only the age of the performers, but the age of their target audience as well, and thus idols are no longer strictly tied to youth culture and youth markets.

Regarding the first point, idols themselves can now potentially mature and grow old: while most idol careers were deemed to be ephemeral, lasting only a couple of months or years (which is still the case for the vast majority of female idols), many male idols and idol groups stayed popular well into adulthood. SMAP managed to extend the longevity of their careers in the business to almost thirty years and they remained popular all throughout this period. Arashi members may have been teens at the time of their debut in 1999, yet their real breakthrough only came ten years later, when they were quite close to thirty. They certainly no longer present themselves as being sweet, helpless, and innocent adolescent boys, but as adult men. For instance, part of Sakurai Shō's public image is being a newscaster who had also covered serious topics such as natural disasters, world poverty, and nuclear disarmament (for which he even interviewed Mikhail Gorbachev). Sakurai of course is still an entertainer who projects a cheerful, goofy atmosphere and is not afraid to enter the kind of humiliating situations that Japanese television thrives on, but at the same time, he is presented as a mature man who is capable of discussing serious issues and taking responsibility. Furthermore, nowadays even senior citizens can become idols: units such as *Jii-POP*[15] (consisting of five male members aged between fifty-nine and eighty), *Obachaaan* (with five energetic elderly ladies who debuted in 2012), and *KGB84* (where the 84 in the name refers to the average age in the group) show that idol as a concept extends well beyond youth culture. These are obviously parody groups—*Jii-POP* was launched as part of a promotional campaign for Kōchi prefecture—nonetheless, they are still regarded as idols, which suggest that youth is no longer a prerequisite and there are other defining characteristics to the label.

Secondly, as it had been mentioned previously in relation to SMAP's success in the 1990s, the target audience of male idols has now expanded well beyond teenage girls. The same can be observed in the case of Arashi, who are known to appeal to men, kids, and older women as well, while many of their fans claim to be not interested in other Johnny's groups (Le Blanc & M., 2014). Not only has Arashi been voted as people's favorite male idol group across all age groups and both genders (LINE, 2020), but in Oricon's poll (Oricon 2018), they were the favorite artist overall, and the only artist that was featured in the top 3 of all the age categories, signifying that they have a much more diverse fanbase than any other singer or band on the list. Moreover, the audience of girl idol groups has widened as well. In the 1980s, Onyanko Club was claimed to have a

[15] The *jii* in the band's name is written with the kanji for old man or grandfather (爺-POP) as a pun on J-pop as a genre.

mainly teenage following, including e.g. senior high school and university clubs with devoted teenage and adolescent boys (Kitagawa, 1991, p. 308), yet the current target audience of AKB48 is said to be predominantly men in their late twenties to mid-sixties (Dent-Spargo, 2017, p. 188).

The third peculiarity associated with idols is the agency or *jimusho* system. In Japan, there is a large number of talent management companies (called *jimusho* in Japanese): Aoyagi (2005) estimates that Tokyo alone had over 1600 such agencies (p. 39), and Marx (2012, p. 39) counted around 1000 in Eastern Japan. These businesses appear to be small, private companies, e.g. Johnny's has cultivated the image of a family-run, small enterprise, so to the unsuspecting eye the industry seems like a diverse scene with healthy competition. However, as Marx explains (2012), behind the curtains these agencies are organized into a centralized, *keiretsu*-like oligopoly with a handful of companies on top. The five most influential *jimusho* networks—Johnny & Associates, Sony Music Artists, Up Front Agency, Burning Productions (including Avex and Rising), and Nagara Production Group (including Being)—wield such immense power over the media industry, for instance, television production, that they effectively dictate which performers get to appear on screen. Over half of the guest spots on music programs (which are considered to be the primary incentive for sales) are semi-automatically allocated to the top five *jimusho*, and the vast majority are shared between the top dozen groups. (Marx 2012)

Marx labels this overbearing dominance as "the most fundamentally distinctive institutional variation" of the Japanese entertainment industry (p. 38). Since the Japanese media is dependent on celebrity for content, a management firm's decision to boycott a network by withholding all their talents can cause real damage. Therefore, these agencies often act as the central authority in casting decisions to the extent where TV stations build their shows around certain celebrities, e.g. Kimura Takuya, and not the other way around (this is also mentioned as a common practice by Lukács (2010), who also uses Kimura as an example), and this is how Johnny's has secured an effective monopoly on boy bands in Japan[16]. In addition, the music industry in particular is considered to be historically connected to organized crime (e.g., Aoyagi, 2005, p. 50; Marx, 2012, p. 22; Ryall, 2017),

[16] There are some rare exceptions like the Exile Tribe, Da Pump, or w-inds, but Marx also notes that these bands face certain difficulties due to the overbearing influence of Johnny's.

and many industry actors behave under the assumption that these companies have the potential to punish noncooperation by extralegal means[17].

Management firms execute control not only on media, but on their talents as well. Agencies are in charge of managing their schedules, negotiating their contracts, organizing the concerts and official fan clubs, but their responsibilities do not stop here. These companies maintain very strict control over the performer's public image, since a spotless reputation is essential for tie-in commercials and product promotions. Idols for instance are not allowed to date, and this rule is often included in their contracts. Infringement to this term is not only newsworthy, but a potential scandal that usually has serious consequences for the performer, e.g. Minegishi Minami, a member of AKB48, publicly shaved her head as atonement when the news of her having a boyfriend got published in the tabloids.[18] The agencies not only police the talents' private lives, they usually also own the master and publishing rights to the artists' music[19] and most of their earnings, and in some cases, even their names—when Nōnen Rena left her agency in 2015, she was forced to change her professional name to "Non," because the agency held the rights to her real name (Schilling, 2018).

Yet, very few performers dare to change management companies, because the repercussions can be severe, and the performers who leave may find themselves on an unofficial black-list, unable to find work in the entertainment industry (Marx, 2012, p. 47–48). When the news story broke that four members of SMAP considered leaving Johnny's to follow their long-time manager in 2016, it was a major scandal. In the end, the band decided to stay, but even entertaining the thought of quitting Johnny's was villainous enough to necessitate a televised public apology to both their fans and Johnny Kitagawa personally (Ashcraft, 2016; Oi, 2016).

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[17] While one would certainly not expect boy bands to be featured on the potentially hazardous research topic list, Johnny's has a threatening reputation among industry insiders as well. An anecdotal testament to the pervasiveness of this assumption is that when some years ago I discussed my academic research on male idols with a Japanese university teacher who was an expert on the music industry, they advised me that I could only write about this topic outside of the country, and I was warned that it would be impossible in Japan. Perhaps this has contributed to the scarcity of available academic research on male idol groups.

[18] Johnny's usually manages to keep the agency's image and its performers' private lives under tight control and out of the major newspapers, but this power does not seem extend to tabloids. One of the biggest and certainly the darkest scandal in the history of the agency broke out in 1999, when the *Shūkan Bunshun* published a series of articles accusing founder Johnny Kitagawa of sexually abusing several under-aged boys in his care. This came following years of detailed accusations from alleged survivors, yet none of the major news media have reported the story. (Sims, 2000; Hernon, 2016)

[19] Johnny's has even created their own labels called Johnny's Entertainment and J-Storm, the latter is in charge of producing Arashi's music and films. Subsequently, subsidiaries named J-One Records and INFINITY RECORDS were also established, which became the private labels for KAT-TUN and Kanjani∞, respectively.

The final, fourth characteristic to highlight is perhaps the most relevant for this thesis: the cultivation of fandom. This is usually discussed merely as a lucrative business strategy in the academic literature, but I argue that the conscious nurture of fandom is such an integral part of the idol industry that it classifies as a distinct feature of the concept, therefore I include it in my categorization. Most stars and celebrities appreciate and interact with their fans, but for idols, these relationships are truly paramount: their open dependence on their supporters is a central formula in their communication, and it distinguishes them from other *tarento*. Idol concerts and interviews usually feature lengthy speeches of gratitude where the teary-eyed performers reminisce over how they owe it all to their fans, whose unwavering support helped them reach their dreams and overcome all the difficulties they encountered on the way. This preoccupation with the audience is also a principal talking point for Arashi. For instance, the first episode of their documentary on Netflix closes with a collage of the members discussing their upcoming hiatus along the following lines. "How do I feel right now? Well… All I can do is give back to the fans," says Ohno, then the screen cuts to a different interview with Aiba, who echoes the same message. Matsumoto continues with: "It's not just for us. It's for all the fans who have supported us until now." Then Ninomiya follows with: "That stage… […] It's a world we create together," and finally, we get Sakurai's answer who lengthily contemplates on the fans' perspective: "What did it take for her [*sic*] to be sitting there in that seat? How much makeup did she have to put on? […] Protecting the emotions of those fans always came first" (Kobayashi et al. & Harada, 2020, translation by Brian Athey, 19:20). Other artists and *tarento* appreciate their fans as well, but for idols, the centrality of audience appreciation is so pronounced that I argue that it conceptually distinguishes them from other forms of celebrity.

The preoccupation with fans points well beyond an empty rhetoric. Management companies consciously cater to these audiences, for instance, the members of AKB48 get chosen by an election process where fans can cast their votes via buying singles. Support groups and fan clubs have been concomitant with idols since the beginning (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 316), and several agencies manage their own fan clubs which play a central role in the business model. For instance, in order to attend a Johnny's concert, one has to be the member of the official fan club of the performer, pay the annual membership fee, apply for tickets through this channel, pay in advance, and then wait for the results of the lottery, because getting a ticket is not guaranteed (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 23). For the fans themselves, supporting an idol often becomes a part of their identity and a source of pride and community. Many enthusiasts label themselves as "Johnny-ota" (*Jani-ota*),

an abbreviation of Johnny's *otaku*, and even publish books about their experiences in the fandom and the reasons for being in it (Matsumoto 2007; Takeuchi 2009; Aoi 2013).

2.3 Who Is an Idol?

As Ferris (2007) points out, the current literature on the sociology of celebrity is predominantly focusing on discussing celebrity either as a commodity or as pathology: the focus is either on how they are exploited to generate profits by the industry, or on how they induce mass hysteria in their obtuse fan following (this will be further explained in Chapter 3.2.3). The same can be observed when it comes to academic discourses on idols, which often define these performers as interchangeable commodities who have no talent. Most of the literature is preoccupied with the economic aspect of idols, and consequently, handles these celebrities as empty personalities produced by the industry with the only objective of maximizing consumption. Whatever personality or individuality there may be is attributed to the producers and agencies (e.g., Aoyagi, 2000; Marx, 2012), and is often understood as "pseudo-individuation" (e.g., Galbraith, 2012, p. 188; Howard, 2014, p. 57). It is important to recognize that this approach draws implicitly, but heavily on the Frankfurt School's theories in the 1940s and '50s on popular culture, especially the work of Theodore W. Adorno.

Frankfurt School critical theorists understood mass culture as a form of cultural hegemony where people are fully indoctrinated by the cultural industry and consumer capitalism, which opened up discussions on the power differentials between producers and audiences—nonetheless, this model allows no room for agency for the consumers. This thought is reflected in Aoyagi's (2004) words when they remark that some of their informants described the entertainment industry's practices as a form of "mass-control" *(taishū sōsa)* which aims to "mould consumers' desires through stylish images and narratives" (p. 145). However, a theoretical shift occurred in the field of mass culture studies in the 1970s and '80s as audiences were recognized as an important factor in the meaning-making process. While the Frankfurt School presumed popular culture and its consumers to be monolithic and was primarily concerned with what the media does to its audience, the contemporary studies on mass culture argue that audiences are not only capable of active reception and oppositional or alternative readings, but that popular culture forms may be sought out and used by people to satisfy certain innate needs, e.g., acquiring information, entertainment, or a sense of belonging and social interactions. This became the tenet for various disciplines and theories today that this thesis was also greatly

influenced by: the contemporary cultural studies (especially the Birmingham School of cultural studies), popular culture studies, audience reception studies, and fan studies.

These approaches represent the two branches of an ongoing dichotomy in academia between two contrasting paradigms—the production/consumption dialectic, that I mentioned in Chapter 2.1, stems from the same root and can be realized in the same dual framework. In the first approach, the primary focus is on production and it is assumed that media makes the audience, i.e., dominant cultural producers shape the ideologies of a society. Mass culture here is often presumed to be a closed system of meaning and the audience is merely a textual position, a theoretical construct. Typical of this school of thought is an emphasis on media texts over context and the employment of textual analysis and psychoanalytical models to analyze audiences. Meanwhile, in the second approach, the agency of specific consumers enjoys primacy in the meaning-making process. Here, usually ethnographic methods are employed, and variables such as the context of reception, historical specificity, class, location, and ethnicity are considered in the analysis.

This will be further discussed in the methodology section of this thesis, however, I call attention to the existence of this dichotomy here because it often goes unacknowledged and unproblematized. Many of the academic theories on idols and their audiences are built on the implicit assumption that stars are primarily phenomena of production without critically reflecting upon or even considering the role of consumers or their potential for active meaning-making. While there is certainly quite some validity to this argument, especially in light of the undeniable hypercommercialization of idols, the emergence of virtual idols, and the power the production agencies hold over the industry in Japan, I argue that a couple of issues need to be considered here for a more balanced view. This is not to deny that there is a thriving economy built upon idols and that their images are greatly influenced by agencies and other industry actors whose main objective is to create profits, but it does not mean that they cannot serve other functions, even if that is not the intention of the production.

If we look at actual accounts on the realities of television production in Japan, it seems that producers do not dictate consumer tastes—they cannot even reliably predict them. Painter (1993) explains that the producers and directors they worked with “rarely knew” which programs would become popular, and their strategy was to stick to a number of established patterns (p. 297), a practice that Lull (1987) considers to be a general characteristic of the popular music industry in the U.S. as well (p. 13). The same is noted by Lukács (2010, p. 102) who describes television production as a site of growing

tensions and constant struggle between the producer, assistant producer, director, assistant director, scriptwriter, and the leading star, where one team member's disapproval of the script is considered to directly translate to a 20 percent loss in target audiences, suggesting that audiences are not monolithic and can be picky about the content they consume.

A further counterargument entails here if we consider the implications of the possible "mass-control" Aoyagi's informants described. If corporations could indeed control audience tastes, idols would have never fallen out of public favor and the "idol ice age" would have been prevented. Johnny's may be one of the most influential agencies in Japan—yet not all Johnny's groups become successful. For Arashi, it took ten years to achieve mainstream success during which they were also competing with other groups that their own agency was promoting at the same time. Exposure certainly can increase a groups' popularity, but it is not a guarantee for success, and only a fraction of idols make it in the end. Training and promoting new talents require an extremely high investment—Aoyagi (2005) estimates this to be around ¥30 to ¥40 million (€224 000 to €300 000) (p. 166)—yet most performers do not become profitable. The sunk and fixed costs of promoting new talents with unpredictable profit potential is remunerative only due to the huge earnings of the most popular idols who can provide the agencies with a return of investment well beyond their costs (Marx, 2012, p. 47.).

AKB48 has adapted to this tendency rather well with the establishment of an election system where fans are granted the power to choose the headliner of the next single. Galbraith and Karlin (2012) thus conclude that the idol industry in Japan fits Alberoni's description of the Hollywood stars where they write that 'the star system […] never creates the star, but it proposes the candidate for "election," and helps to retain the favor of the "electors" (p. 21). They note in passing that predicting consumer tastes is increasingly difficult, however, they describe this "elective agency" primarily as a marketing tactic to sell CDs rather than a valid form of market research in such a fickle domain.

It is important to highlight that the lines between consumers and producers are blurring not only in Japan, but globally. The drastic changes in technology significantly facilitated audience participation and the production, sharing, and consumption of creative content, including fan works. As a consequence of this participatory culture, fans everywhere are emerging as an increasingly important segment that producers are trying not only to engage with, but to actively cater to as well (e.g., Hellekson & Busse, 2014d; Jenkins, 2006; and LaMarre, 2004, also observed this in regards to anime *otaku* in Japan). In many

cases, fans themselves become producers. A well-known literary example is the *Fifty Shades* trilogy by E. L. James, which was first released online as a *Twilight* fan fiction series, but many popular video games, e.g. Counter-Strike and DotA were originally developed by players as so-called "mods" for other games (Half-Life and Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos, respectively), and both were later acquired and released as separate games by Valve Corporation. This also illustrates that content creation can no longer be understood as a simple top-down, producer-driven process which the Frankfurt School suggests, and companies are increasingly realizing the profitability of taking fandom seriously.

This chapter has so far attempted to locate idols and the idol system in a historical context and a conceptual framework, i.e., to introduce how the idol system came to be and what constitutes an idol. Before we move on to the next section, which focuses on idol—fan relationships and the role of audiences, I would like to conclude this part with a reflection upon another, individual aspect of the nature of these performers' appeal. Is there a certain personal quality that makes some idols more popular than others? Is there a talent they possess after all?

It is often noted that idols are not especially gifted at music or dancing, for example, the (self-admitted) tone-deafness of SMAP's Nakai Masahiro is somewhat of a running gag in Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2004a, p. 358; Lukács, 2010, p. 46.). Lukács (2010) concludes that idols and *tarento* "are not blessed with special talent in any particular entertainment genre" (p. 46), and some idol critics express even harsher opinions: "Kimura Takuya has never created anything out and out. He is surrounded by creative artists, but he himself seems to be void, like the Japanese emperor" (Kikuchi, 2009, as cited in Nagaike, 2012, p. 100; translation by Nagaike). Similarly, Brasor and Tsubuku define idols as "the TV personality who, in fact, has no talent but who does have a distinctive personality that can be exploited" (Brasor and Tsubuku 1997, p. 46.) This "non-ability" (*hijitsuryoku*) is what makes the idol "life-sized" (*tōshindai*), and it is claimed to be their strongest selling point. Aoyagi (2000) quotes Aizawa Hideyoshi, the president of Sun Music Production, on the significance of this concept:

> To be "life-sized" is to publicly confirm that idols are not living in this world of their own, but together with people who are there to support them and whom they are expected to support. […] Human relationships are what hold idols in their place and enable idol businesses to function. (p. 311)

Sociologist Ogawa Hiroshi dedicates an entire chapter to idols in their book about the Japanese music industry (1988), where they argue that the right approach to understand the idol phenomena is not to analyze why singers become idols, but rather why idols decide to sing. Ogawa contends that when it comes to idols, *character is king*—while melodies, lyrics, and performances are all important aspects of being an idol, the key factor is their personality. Singing has two major benefits: first, it increases exposure and recognition, and second, songs allow idols to address intimate subjects such as sexuality that otherwise would be difficult to discuss. (Ogawa, 1988, 120–123). Matsumoto Mika, a well-known Arashi fan, similarly argues that while a male idol's handsomeness or dancing skills are attractive, their real charm (*miryoku*) is their personality (2007, pp. 33–34).

It is important to realize that popular culture industries operate on a mass production logic and stars are the product of a balance between standardization and differentiation (Holmes, 2000, p. 98). Furthermore, considering the level of influence *jimusho* yield over their performers' image, it is difficult to distinguish what part of their "individuality" is real, and what is intentionally developed (Howard, 2014, p. 57). This, however, does not mean idols are empty shells. Firstly, as Lukács noted, top idols like Kimura Takuya are actively involved in shaping their roles and often veto certain decisions or parts (Lukács, 2010, p. 70). Secondly, while television programs are rarely spontaneous and certain segments are definitely scripted, if we consider the sheer magnitude of idol appearances, it becomes implausible that all aspects of the idol's personality are constructed and perfectly controlled by the management agencies. After all, consistently and convincingly playing a completely manufactured role almost every day on television for decades would require such exquisite acting skills that idols are not credited to have.

In a mini-documentary (Mobara, 2007, 12:48), Ninomiya was interviewed on what Johnny's and being an idol means to him, and he explained that idols are able to read the atmosphere (*kūki ga yomeru*): they need to understand what people want from them and what their preferences are. This is arguably the real key to the success of not only idols, but any media performer today. Lindsay Ellis—a film critic, author, and prominent video essayist who mainly develops content for YouTube—describes this as follows:

> The product that Youtubers, Twitch streamers and other influencers sell is almost exclusively affect—and this is a form of emotional labor. […] A part of […] what some would call influencer culture is that it's important for creators that their audience think they know you and that your job depends on maintaining that sense of accessibility and authenticity without going crazy. The

> premium of authenticity is predicated on maintaining that the affect is convincing. The challenge for creators is to maintain the illusion for their followers of feeling like they do know this creator, when, in reality, they only know the affect, the construct, the side of the creator that the creator, most likely without their making a good conscious decision to do so, has decided it is most beneficial for you, the audience, to see. It is impossible to have a personal connection to a giant faceless mass of people who are, in effect, your customers, and when deception becomes clear, fans can get angry. (Lindsay Ellis, 2018, 27:08)

While idols on the surface may seem like silly pop singers whose bubble gum tunes and vaguely synchronized dancing skills will certainly not revolutionize the music scene, it is important to acknowledge that they are also professional entertainers in an industry that is notoriously competitive. Even the most popular performers can quickly lose their star status if they compromise their image or fail to find a way to keep up their audience's interest. Idols have to find a way to consistently emulate an authentic, accessible image and balance it with their advertising persona, which can be quite challenging considering the amount of product promotion they are expected to do.

At the Berlin Film Festival press conference mentioned before (Berlinale: Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, 2007, 18:48), which Ninomiya also attended, the cast were answering serious questions about the movie and generally the war, and the atmosphere was rather formal. However, when Ninomiya was also addressed by a reporter in a two-part question, he missed his cue. When he realized his mistake, his reply—a confused "*Hai?*"—came at the perfect comedic timing and tone, and the international audience, most of whom presumedly did not even speak Japanese or were familiar with him, burst out in laughter. The mood in the room had changed in a heartbeat, and Clint Eastwood jokingly remarked that "*that's why I cast him.*" Good looks and agency connections can boost an idol but maintaining a successful career over several decades demands a lot more: hard work, serious entertainment skills, and understanding audience expectations. This is no small feat that only a few manage to achieve, and Arashi is certainly among them.

3 The Spectator

3.1 Tale as Old as Time

Boy bands are perhaps the one music formation that most people *love to hate*.

As Duffett (2012) notes, boy bands are often excluded from academic literature on popular music, and even when they are discussed, popular discourses follow the same pre-meditated patterns of dismissal: "boy bands are over-rated, pointless and talentless manufactured groups of young, insincere, probably gay men who will never last in the pop music field because they primarily rely on their looks to peddle cheesy or sacrilegious cover versions to legions of seduced fans" (p. 186). The same talking points also reoccur in the general discourses on male idol bands in Japan, as it was exhibited in the previous chapter, and the reputation of the fans of these idols is not any better. For instance, fervent fans of Arashi are called Ara-sick (*Arashikku*) in Japanese (Weblio, n.d.), and newspapers eagerly sensationalize stories about fan behavior that they deem extreme, crazy, or delusional (e.g., Moon, 2013; Le Blanc & M., 2014). This sensationalism is not a new phenomenon, and it is not limited to Japan.

Historically, female audiences have been consistently associated with mass hysteria. In fact, if one looks up "mass hysteria" as a keyword in the *Music in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Encyclopedia* (Thompson, 2014), the "Mass Hysteria Today" section concerns male musicians and their female fans exclusively. The article directly associates the term with boy bands, claiming that these groups "generate hysterical audience adoration among young girls, and then quickly disappear to be replaced by the next manufactured group. In such cases, the line between media hype and musical talent is difficult to draw" (p. 678). This "hysterical adoration" is a reoccurring topic that has been historically coupled with a disesteeming edge. Over fifty years ago, when the Beatles played in Shea Stadium in 1965, *The New York Times* encapsulated the event as: "[the audience's] immature lungs produced a sound so staggering, so massive, so shrill and sustained that it crossed the line from enthusiasm into hysteria and soon it was in the area of the classic Greek meaning of the world pandemonium—the region of the demons" (Schumach, 1965). Interestingly, this curious condition predates not only the Beatles, but television as well. Note the particularities of a 19th century frenzy surrounding a certain musical figure:

> The symptoms, which are odious to the modern reader, bear every resemblance to an infectious disease, and merely to call them mass hysteria hardly does justice

> to what actually took place. His portrait was worn on brooches and cameos. Swooning lady admirers attempted to take cuttings of his hair, and they surged forward whenever he broke a piano string in order to make it into a bracelet. Some of these insane female "fans" even carried glass phials about their persons into which they poured his coffee dregs. Others collected his cigar butts, which they hid in their cleavages. The overtones were clearly sexual. Psychologists may have a wonderful time explaining such phenomena, but they cannot change the facts: Liszt had taken Berlin by storm, and for a pianist that was unprecedented. (Walker, 1983, p. 371)

The intense adoration for composer and pianist Franz Liszt reached such an intensity that it got coined as Lisztomania by Heinrich Heine in the 1840s (Heine et al., 1922) (Figure 1).

In 1912, von Krafft-Ebing, one of the great figures of forensic psychiatry, observed that women of all ages tend to get so fascinated by singers, actors, and athletes that they lavish them with love letters (Hoffman & Meloy, 2008, p. 166). Similarly, Dyer (1998) notes that particularly intense star—audience relationships occur among socially subordinate groups such as adolescents, women, and gay communities, who "all share a peculiarly intense degree of role/identity conflict and pressure, and an (albeit partial) exclusion from the dominant articulacy of, respectively, adult, male, heterosexual culture" (p. 32).

Figure 1

Histories of hysterics

Note. *On left: caricature of women attending a Liszt concert (Hosemann, 1842). On right: Arashi concert; screenshot from their Netflix documentary (Kobayashi et al., 2020).*

There is clearly something about male musicians that resonates with these groups, and this affection seems to transcend space and time. However, beyond the sensationalism and pathologizing, female audiences and fandom were often overlooked until the early 1970s (Cragin & Simonds, 2006). Girls were originally absent from the studies on youth subcultures, occasionally referenced only in a footnote, and the general understanding was that only men engage in such resistant behavior. McRobbie & Garber (1976) were among the first scholars who argued that not only were girls present in male subcultures, they also had a distinctive culture of their own. They used the teenybopper phenomenon as an example of this, a subculture that is exclusive to girls who follow adolescent trends in music, fashion, and culture. While this differs from its male counterparts in its commercial origins, McRobbie & Garber argued that it is nonetheless a site of active feminine identity that offers different possibilities for resistance for its members.

Female subcultures became a legitimate subject of academic inquiry later on, especially in the 1980s, when audience studies gained traction. Janice A. Radway's ethnographic book on romance readers, *Reading the Romance*, was published in 1984 and it was praised as "perhaps the most influential study of reception of the 1980s" (Cragin & Simonds, 2006, p. 204). In the early to mid-1990s, the first wave of fan studies took off (Gray et al., 2007, p. 1.), and quite some scholarly attention was directed towards predominantly female Star Trek fan communities (e.g., Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992).

Fandom is a popular research topic in Japan as well, since anime, manga, and their fans, the *otaku* and the *fujoshi*[20] have been thoroughly researched in the past couple of decades. The idol field is also getting popular, especially due to AKB48's notable success. However, the available literature often limits its scope to female idols and their male fans: for instance, *Aidoru Nippon* (Idol Japan) by Nakamori (2007) or *Aidoru/Media Ron Kōgi* (Idol Culture Through the Prism of Media Theory) by Nishi (2017) both use the generic word for idol in their titles, but they use female examples exclusively. In some cases, the limitation to girl groups is evident from the title, e.g. *Aidoru Koku Furon* (Idol Wealth of Nations) specifies that it is about the era of (Matsuda) Seiko/(Nakamori) Akina and AKB48/Momoiro Clover Z (all female performers) in its subtitle (Sakai, 2014), and sometimes the cover featuring only young girls hints at this omission (e.g. Nakagawa, 2005). In other cases, like in Okajima & Okada's *Gurūpu Aidoru Shinkaron*

[20] *Otaku* refers to people (usually men) with an obsessive interest in something, particularly anime or manga. *Fujoshi* is a (typically female) fan of manga and anime that feature romantic relationships between men.

(Evolutionary Theory of Group Idols, 2011) one has to turn to the last page of the preface to discover that the book actually excludes male idol groups. There are some books that at least mention Johnny's groups, of course, but they are usually written from the perspective of music production or television (e.g., Ogawa, 1988, Azami, 2004), and they are not that much interested in the actual audiences of these idols[21].

In English, to the best of my knowledge, there are only two books published specifically on idols: Aoyagi Hiroshi's *Islands of Eight Million Smiles* (2005), which, again, is preoccupied with the male fans of female idols, and Galbraith & Karlin's *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (2012), which is a collection of essays. There are shorter studies on male idols (e.g. Darling-Wolf has written extensively on SMAP's image), and some works in other fields touch upon the topic as well—for instance, the previous, historical section in Chapter 2 mostly relied on accounts concerning Japanese television (e.g., Painter, 1993; Lukács, 2010) and movies (Gerow, 2011; Howard, 2014).

The topic of this section is idol audiences. As it was mentioned in Chapter 2.3, "human relationships are what hold idols in their place and enable idol businesses to function" (Aoyagi, 2000, p. 311), and Chapter 3 will further look into the current academic discourses on what these human relationships are like. Chapter 3.2 is centered on the general discourses regarding idol—fan relationships from the perspective of production: I will first outline the existing literature, and then connect it into a wider academic framework. Chapter 3.3. explores how these relationships are capitalized, and Chapter 3.4. proceeds with discussing reception phenomena, the general experiences of spectators. Chapter 3.5. then analyzes the current theories that narrow down the scope to the audiences of male idols specifically, before I move on to Chapter 4 and explain my own research.

3.2 Idol—Fan Relationships

3.2.1 "A Rose by Any Other Name:" Reconceptualizing Televisual Intimacy

This chapter will discuss idol—fan relationships. To reiterate, the sources listed here treat the audience as more of a theoretical position rather than actual people. They rely mostly on content analysis, empirical research, and anecdotal data; therefore, their

[21] Outside academia, on the other hand, quite many personal fan accounts have been published as books, and some of these are also referenced in this thesis, e.g., Matsumoto, 2007; Takeuchi, 2009; Narima, 2010; Aoi, 2013; mikīru, 2014.

discussion on the "intimacy" experienced is based upon what is shown on the screen rather than on accounts of actual viewers. There is a handful of literature with a more ethnographic approach that address the audience's meaning-making process and the so-called gaze, but these will be discussed in Chapter 3.5. Here, the focus is on the idol—fan relationships from the perspective of production, and the purpose is once again to organize the current literature, that tends to be rather dispersed, into a unified framework, in order to provide a solid basis for critical engagement.

Ogawa Hiroshi (1988) argues that even though idols become exceptional while performing, once they put down the microphone, they are perceived by their audience just like an ordinary classmate. Unlike fictional anime characters, these celebrities are direct representations of actual people who exist in the same world as their audience, familiar faces that one might encounter on the street one day, just like real acquaintances, albeit without the threat of rejection. Ogawa draws on Alfred Schütz's theory (Schütz 1932) on the structure of the social world, where Schütz differentiates between consociates (*nakama* in Ogawa's translation) and contemporaries (*dōjidaijin*).[22] According to Schütz, while consociates share the same time and have access to each other in the physical world (e.g. in the case of acquaintances), anonymous contemporaries who only share the same time remain strangers to each other. Ogawa contends that idols thus occupy a third, special class, as they stand somewhere between these two categories: even though they are mere contemporaries, they are perceived as consociates by their audience, so he labels them as **"pseudo-consociates"** (*gijiteki nakama*[23]). (Ogawa, 1988, pp. 120–121)

Andrew Painter also comments on the illusory nature of this quasi-intimate interaction in their study about Japanese television (1993). They argue that commercial TV producers in Japan deliberately attempt to create close and familiar relationships with their viewers in order to establish so-called **"televisual quasi-intimacy,"** and Painter analyzes the strategies the industry uses to achieve this. Some of these tactics include emphasizing themes related to unity (national, local, cultural, or racial) and unanimity (consensus, common sense), and the representation of spontaneity and play in order to simulate intimate, informal in-group interaction. The result is an electronically created *uchi*, a mass-mediated in-group which mimics the intimate, informal communication style of the domestic sphere, and, as such, is experienced as both private and public domain at the

[22] Schütz's division consists of four categories, however, the other two (predecessors and successors) are irrelevant here since they do not share a community of time.

[23] Aoyagi Hiroshi has translated *gijiteki nakama* as „quasi companion" (Aoyagi, 2005, p. 68), and Galbraith uses "pseudo friend" (2018, p. 136). These are perhaps more accessible expressions, however, I wanted to reference the commonly used English translation of Schütz's original term in the translation.

same time. While this televisual *uchi* is imaginary, it is real and tangible enough to facilitate empathy and identification among viewers. Painter quotes media sociologist Watanabe Jun on this fascinating contradiction:

> Television never directly connects those who appear [on the screen] and those who view. The relationship that forms between them is always a quasi-relationship; in reality, they are absent from each other. Nonetheless, television makes it feel as if there is an extremely real and direct interaction taking place […]. [T]elevision makes us realize that "the greatest presence is simultaneously the greatest absence". (Watanabe, 1989, as cited in Painter 1993, p. 325; translation by Painter, omission is mine)

Though this study analyzes these patterns strictly in the context of modern Japanese society, Painter acknowledges that "there is something universal and human about the Japanese experience of television" (Painter, 1993, p. 325), and they also add in a footnote that "it is reasonable to expect that some kind of quasi-intimacy may develop between TV personalities and members of the viewing audience in any society where TV is usually watched in the privacy of the home" (Painter, 1993, p. 295).

Lukács (2010) also addresses this phenomenon, but they label it as **"intimate televisuality."** They argue that "the transmedia circulation of the *tarento* has generated an intimate televisual culture that viewers enjoyed as a source of stability in the wake of massive socioeconomic changes" (Lukács, 2010, p. 24), thus they do not consider this to be the outcome of television viewing in general, like Painter did, but attribute it directly to idols and the *tarento* system. According to Lukács, this intimacy serves several functions. Firstly, it creates a sense of belonging and community, and it offers compensation for the corrosion of traditional forms of solidarity. Secondly, it makes the television content more interactive and enjoyable, and it instigates people to commit to domestic programming. Thirdly, it increases brand value and promotional potential.

Galbraith and Karlin use yet another term when they refer to relationship between idols and their audience as **"media intimacy"** (also referred to as **"affective intimacy"** and **"intimacy of celebrity"**). They also establish that the basis for these emotional ties is the celebrities' cross-platform media ubiquity[24] which is underpinned by television being the medium of intimacy (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, pp. 8–9). They note in passing that

[24] They claim that "the frequency with which they and other idols and celebrities present themselves within Japan's media-saturated culture makes them not only identifiable but familiar. In the daily routine of life in contemporary Japan, one might have more contact with a particular idol or celebrity than with one's own family. This is the basis for feelings of intimacy." (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012, p. 9.)

television's capacity to create emotional relationships between viewers and performers is not unique to Japan, however, they argue that it is more pronounced there as a result of the transmedia omnipresence of idols.

Furthermore, they consider this affective intimacy to be a key factor in the success of idol groups. For example, they claim that the notable popularity of the famous girl group AKB48 is mainly due to a business model where they promote opportunities for greater proximity and connection with their fans, which in return generates significantly better sales. As they have put it: "[f]ans are not purchasing CDs (music) so much as they are buying an experience that resonates with emotional meaning intensified through the frequency of their investment in the idol" (ibid, p. 21).

While all these sources use different terms, they are referring to the same phenomenon: repeated media exposure to an idol evokes a false sense of intimacy in the audience. Ogawa and Painter highlight the one-sided, illusory nature of this relationship, while Lukács, Galbraith and Karlin concentrate more on how this intimacy gets capitalized. All four texts emphasize that television as a medium plays an essential role, since the device itself is associated with one's private sphere, the home, therefore it is considered to be a "technology of intimacy."

In their introduction to their book *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* that was discussed above, Galbraith and Karlin (2012) make the following claim:

> Much of the existing English language literature on idols, celebrity, and fandom is anthropological (Robertson 1998; Kelly 2004; Aoyagi 2005), and tends to tell us more about Japan than about the workings of idols in media and consumer society. These sorts of arguments keep the nation hermetically sealed, and impede contributions to, and engagement with, broader academic debates outside the study of Japan. (p. 4)

Keeping in line with this statement, in the following I will recontextualize the theories mentioned above in a wider academic framework. While Japan's interconnected media environment serves as a perfect incubator for this feeling of intimacy due to the unparalleled level of exposure, I am about to argue that, at its core, these idols' ability to evoke one-sided intimacy is not unique to Japan or to idol groups, therefore it can and should be connected into a broader academic debate about celebrity and media effect research. It is important to remain sensitive to the local characteristics of the Japanese entertainment world, however, I will argue that the underlying psychological processes of the audience can be understood as somewhat universal, and as such, could benefit from

already existing research on the phenomena elsewhere. Intimacy and authenticity are becoming more and more important factors for success in today's increasingly fragmentized media, and producers everywhere use similar strategies to facilitate the establishment of an illusory connection to media persona. In order to locate these shared patterns, it is necessary to first settle on a common terminology.

3.2.2 The Name Is Bond. Parasocial Bond

The term **parasocial interaction (PSI)** was originally coined in 1956 by anthropologist Donald Horton and sociologist R. Richard Wohl in their essay titled "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." Para-social or, hereinafter, parasocial interaction refers to the psychological attachment between mass media users and personae (e.g., talk show hosts, newscasters, actors, fictional characters, social media influencers) where viewers perceive the performer as an intimate conversational partner despite the one-sided nature of the viewing episode. As such, PSI is understood as an illusory experience where audiences interact with representations of humans appearing in the media as if they were engaged in a typical, reciprocal social relationship with them. With repeated exposure to the media performer, the viewer may develop a **parasocial relationship (PSR)**, a sense of intimacy towards the media persona that can extend beyond any single viewing episode (e.g., Giles, 2002; Hartmann, 2016; Dibble et al., 2016).

In the past, these two concepts were often conflated both theoretically and methodologically which has led to some confusion: e. g. the PSI-Scale (Rubin et al., 1985), which is one of the most widely used questionnaires for measuring parasocial phenomena to this day[25], mainly consists of items that measure PSR instead of PSI. Nonetheless, in the current literature a clear conceptual clarification has been made, which this thesis will also follow. Based on this, PSI is understood as the within-viewing experience of mutual awareness that is confined to the media exposure situation, while PSR is a "more enduring, long-term, and usually positive, one-sided intimacy at a distance that users develop toward media performers, based on repeated encounters" (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 24). In addition, **parasocial phenomena** is used as a collective term for all

[25] There is quite some heterogeneity in the methods of measuring parasocial phenomena which further complicates the comparison of different works, however, this is beyond the scope of this thesis. Other methods of measurement include the EPSI-Scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) for PSI, and for PSR, they vary from the 24-item Multiple Parasocial Relationships Scale (Tukachinsky, 2010) to the simple, one-item Drinking Buddy Scale (Powell et al., 2012). For a detailed account on the available published measures, see Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky, 2010; or Liebers & Schramm, 2019.

kinds of parasocial responses of audiences to media characters, including PSI, PSR and parasocial break-ups (PSBU). (Giles, 2002; Hartmann, 2016; Dibble et al., 2016; Liebers & Schramm, 2019)

Despite their origins in the field of psychology, parasocial phenomena have become some of the most widely researched topics within communication studies. Though Horton and Wohl's essay originally failed to create an impact on the scientific community beyond their working group, the concept was resurrected by Rosengren and Windahl sixteen years later, in 1972. This is mostly due to the advent of the uses and gratifications approach in mass communication research in the 1970s and 1980s, when researchers became interested in what people do with the media rather than what media does to its audience. There has been a rising tendency in the number of publications per year ever since, where works from vastly differing scientific backgrounds and methodological approaches have contributed to the study of parasocial phenomena, including the field of psychology, advertising effectiveness, and journalism research. There is also an upsurge of interest in the relationship between parasocial phenomena and social networking services, as the Internet has transformed and expanded the category of celebrity to include Youtubers, streamers etc. in addition to television personae, and also provided the audience with an easy, real-time access to private segments to their lives. While parasocial relationships remain one-sided, they appear to be more interactive, which increases the perceived intensity and intimacy of the relationship. (Giles, 2002; Liebers & Schramm, 2019)

Though the concepts' popularity is relatively new in academia, it is important to note that PSI and PSR are not modern-day phenomena, neither are they exclusively media-related. People have been nurturing strong imaginary relationships with strangers in most societies throughout history and across cultures, long before the era mass communication—be it with gods, spirits, monarchs, or even fictional protagonists in novels (Caughey, 1984; Giles, 2002, p. 287; Fuller-Seeley, 2017, p. 28). While audiovisual content is effective at intensifying these perceived interactions, the medium of television is not the sole cause, nor even a prerequisite for the intimacy the audience experiences. Therefore, I argue that the role of television in idol—audience relationships in Japan is better understood as a catalyst, a mere facilitator of PSI (and thence PSR), rather than the reason for its existence.

Then what other factors come into play?

3.2.3 Stranger Danger: Parasociability as Pathology?

When the uses and gratifications approach was applied to describe parasocial phenomena and researchers first became interested in what kind of special needs the media and these relationships cater to, two competing explanations emerged for people's viewing motivations: a compensatory approach (i.e., Deficiency paradigm) and a non-compensatory approach (i.e., Global-Use paradigm). The first viewed PSRs as abnormalities resulting from deficiencies in social life (for instance, Horton and Wohl's study originally considered parasocial phenomena as a way "the social inept" compensate for loneliness). However, this was later contested by a second, non-compensatory approach also known as the Global-Use paradigm, which claimed that PSR is a more universal experience that results from a general process of emotional bonding with a persona, in which all individuals may readily engage. According to this theory, media and face-to-face interactions are not mutually exclusive, but complementary in satisfying people's needs, which might explain why television viewing has become such an inherent part of everyday life (Tsao, 1996; Giles, 2002).

It is easy to understand why one might suspect a possible pathological element contributing to parasocial bonding. Parasocial relationships mimic orthosocial or face-to-face interactions in many ways with one major exception: there is little to no risk of rejection which makes them relatively safe compared to regular interpersonal relationships (Derrick et al., 2008, p. 262), a characteristic Ogawa (1988) has highlighted as well in relation to the appeal of idols (pp. 120–123). In addition, individuals with lower empathy, lower extraversion, and higher neuroticism seem to engage in high television consumption (Tsao, 1996). In the light of this, it seems reasonable to presume that people with social deficits, e.g. low self-esteem individuals with a severe fear of rejection, might be more inclined to form parasocial relationships.

Consequently, a plethora of research has attempted to connect parasocial bonds to chronic loneliness and personality variables such as high neuroticism, low self-esteem, lower levels of empathy and introversion. However, interestingly enough, findings regarding the correlation between the aforementioned traits and PSI have been equivocal, and have failed to provide consistent empirical support (Tsao, 1996; Giles, 2002; Cohen, 2003; Derrick et al., 2008; Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Tuchakinsky, 2010; Hartmann, 2016).

Tsao's study (1996) offers a compelling insight into the interplay of these two paradigms. When they analyzed people's compensatory media use in the context of parasocial interaction and viewing level as dependent variables, and empathy,

extraversion-introversion, and neuroticism as independent variables, they found that: "when the canonical analysis and the hierarchical regressions are viewed conjointly, a general pattern seems to emerge: almost all hypotheses that were supported with respect to parasocial interaction belonged to the Global-use paradigm. […] However, this pattern is reversed when viewing level becomes the dependent variable" (p. 104). In other words, individuals with traits reflecting poor interpersonal skills (such as lower empathy, lower extraversion, and higher neuroticism) watched more television, yet exhibited no stronger, and sometimes even weaker parasociability than respondents equipped with socially facilitating personality characteristics. Tsao also suggests a strong parallelism between the parasocial and the orthosocial, where personality traits that are conducive to orthosocial interaction are also beneficial for parasocial success. This indicates that social deficits do not reliably predict parasocial interaction, which supports the non-compensatory model.

Despite the limited empirical success, parasocial phenomena continues to be pathologized. As Liebers and Schramm (2019) note:

> Many studies on parasocial phenomena remain problem oriented, as indicated by the keyword "negative psychology." […] In contrast, researchers rarely consider potential associations between parasocial phenomena and positive recipient traits. Questions such as "Do people who are more creative and imaginative form stronger parasocial bonds?" are investigated much less than "Do less formally educated people form stronger parasocial bonds?" A better balance and more thinking out of the box, in which parasocial phenomena appear as more than just a potential compensation for various deficits, would be desirable in future research. (pp. 16–17)

The same preconception is also apparent in social sciences when it comes to studying celebrity[26]. As Ferris (2007) observes:

> One of the most prevalent themes in sociological and other social science work on fame and celebrity is that of pathology. Researchers, theorists and social critics tend to proceed from the assumption that fame and celebrity, in all their manifestations, are evil, corrupt, or otherwise contemptible; given these

[26] This stigma applies not only to those who like celebrities, but also to those who study them. Lukács (2010) mentions that many of their informants questioned the legitimacy of television dramas and the idols starring in them as a research topic (p. 19), and Aoyagi (2005) also disclosed that they have been ridiculed and even called a "sex maniac" for their research on female idols, which would not have been the case if they chose other, historically acclaimed stage performers as a subject of inquiry (p. 19).

> assumptions, it should not be surprising that their resulting findings support the idea of celebrity as pathological. […] Almost every hypothesis in this research series [as in, the work of McCutcheon and associates] proceeds from the assumption that interest in celebrities is an indicator of substandard mental health. Qualities such as dependency and 'game-playing' in romantic relationships, shyness, loneliness, authoritarianism and even 'Machiavellianism' are investigated as correlates of celebrity worship. Interestingly, their findings rarely reveal strong relationships between these dismal personality traits and celebrity worship ... but their choice of topics and construction of hypotheses assume the worst: that celebrity is dangerous and fans are damaged by their contact with it. (pp. 374–375)

While it is important to remark upon and acknowledge the prevalence of this pathologizing approach in academia, I wish to reiterate that research has concluded that social deficits do not reliably predict nor are related to parasocial phenomena. Taking this into account, "PSR were re-conceptualized as an extension of, rather than a substitution for, real life interactions" (Tuchakinsky, 2010, p. 74). Inevitably, PSR can lead to psychopathological effects in some cases (e.g., celebrity stalking and erotomania, a delusional disorder where individuals believe that someone else is infatuated with them)[27], however, this is relatively rare, especially considering the ubiquity of parasocial phenomena. Therefore, in this thesis parasocial relationships are understood as natural byproducts of time spent with media personae, i.e., extensions of normal social relationships that manifest in a mediated context.

3.2.4 "Is This the Real Life? Is This Just Fantasy?"

But how similar exactly is the parasocial to the orthosocial, and in what way do they complement each other? According to Perse and Rubin's study (1989), the psychological processes applied in interpersonal and mediated communication are fundamentally the same, especially when it comes to personal constructs and uncertainty reduction (see also Tsao, 1996; Giles, 2002; Derrick et al., 2008; Derrick et al., 2009; Dibble et al., 2016). This means that the longer a parasocial relationship lasts with a character, the more confident people become in predicting the character's behaviors and feelings, just like in

[27] The term erotomania was coined in 1838 by the French psychiatrist Esquiro (Hoffmann & Melox, 2008, p. 165) in relation to, for instance, the stalkers of theater actors, so it also predates the era of television, just like parasocial phenomena. One notable example is the case of John Hinckley Jr., who shot Ronald Reagan to demonstrate his devotion to actress Jodie Foster (Giles, 2002, p. 299).

ordinary relationships. As Giles (2002, pp. 283–284) points out, once person judgements or characteristics are attributed to a figure, we tend to respond to them in the same way as to face-to-face acquaintances incorporated into our social network. There are two key influencing factors to consider: the duration of exposure to the character over time, and social attraction (i.e., the perception that the media persona could be a friend), both of which increase liking and intimacy, though the effects may vary according to the media figure type (e.g., Giles, 2002; Hartmann, 2016; Song & Fox, 2016). This parallels many of the points that were highlighted as prerequisites for idol creation: likable personalities, who present themselves as ordinary and accessible, get ubiquitously promoted through various media outlets for long period of times.

Derrick et al. (2008, p. 262) note two further parallels emerging from the literature. First, parasocial relationships can rectify social rejection from a real relationship when it comes to mood and esteem effects or the impairments on cognitive tasks that such exclusion usually triggers. Second, people's response to their parasocial relationship partners mimics their reaction to close personal acquaintances. Individuals with strong parasocial attachments report more empathy and a greater desire to disclose, moreover, they also demonstrate similar social facilitation effects to those that occur while performing in front of a human audience.

When comparing PSR to ordinary social relations, the role of the imaginary also needs to be addressed. A growing number of literature on the function of imagination in social interactions suggests that some imaginative activity, such as rehearsing interactions, or having imaginary friends during childhood, may be an influential factor in forming and maintaining real social interactions with others (Giles, 2002, p. 287). Tsao has also compared television to a "'training ground' for empathy and perspective-taking" (Tsao, 1996, 105). Thus, the use of imagination actually constitutes another similarity between parasocial phenomena and ordinary relationship building and social activity.

Just like ordinary social relationships, PSRs vary not only in strength, but qualitatively as well, as they encompass a broad spectrum of different kinds of associations including romantic bonds or negative PSRs (Tuchakinsky, 2010; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Moreover, even ordinary, face-to-face social situations may include a level of parasocial, e.g., when someone develops a crush on a classmate that they have never interacted with, or during a lecture or speech in front of a large audience (Giles, 2002, p. 287). Therefore Giles (2002) suggests a new model for PSI which interprets all interactions as a continuum of social and parasocial, and thus allows for intermediate positions. The scale extends from a purely parasocial encounter with a fictional figure on one end to a one-

on-one conversation with a close friend on the other, and broadly distinguishes between three levels of PSI according to the authenticity or realism of the character's representation.

3.2.5 Love Makes You Real

It is crucial to underscore that while the reciprocity of PSI and PSR may be illusory, the audience's mediated experience is real. Even though viewers usually recognize that the parasocial relationship is one-sided, it feels reciprocal and genuine to them. As Lukács (2010) has remarked as well in the closing lines of their book about Japanese television: "scripted or not, affects feel real. Branded or not, selves feel whole when they are protected within the boundaries of affective alliances" (p. 209). Galbraith (2012) also notes this when they observe: "constantly present and exposed, the idol becomes 'real,' the basis of feelings of intimacy among viewers, though this is independent of 'reality'" (p. 186).

In consistency with the third-person effect hypothesis[28], people often deny or underestimate the extent of their parasocial attachment (Giles, 2002). Nonetheless, PSRs have the potential to trigger fervent emotions, and the real intensity of one's involvement becomes evident once the relationship is terminated. Unlike parasocial interactions, PSRs continue beyond the viewing episode, however, that does not mean that they cannot end. A parasocial breakup (or PSBU) occurs when the PSR with a character is threatened with a departure of some type, e.g., when a television show is taken off the air, or the character (or the actor) dies. Cohen (2013, p. 200) found that the dissolution of a parasocial relationship—in addition to the development and maintenance—also follows similar patterns to those of orthosocial relations, and the symptoms resemble the loss of a friend or beloved one, though in a less intense way.

Anecdotal data are manifold concerning the emotional distress experienced following a parasocial breakup, e.g. the public outpour of grief after the death of Princess Diana. However, even seemingly preposterous events can evoke extreme reactions. For instance, someone admitted that when they had learned that Kerry Washington, the lead actress in the television show Scandal, got married to someone other than their fictional love interest on the show, they experienced physical symptoms so severe that they had to take

[28] The third-person effect theory, coined by Davison in 1983, predicts that "individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves" (Davison, 1983, p. 3), thus they often underestimate how much the message influences them.

medication (Clark, 2016, p. 186). When Arashi's hiatus was announced, shock, disbelief, and tears followed ("Popular Boy Band Arashi's Decision to Take a Break," 2019). As Gergen (1991) notes (somewhat hyperbolically) about the intensity and validity of emotional responses to media characters: "It is undoubtedly true that for many people film relationships provide the most emotionally wrenching experience of the average week. The ultimate question is not whether media relationships approximate the normal in their significance, but whether normal relationships can match the power of artifice" (p. 57).

To conclude, parasocial and orthosocial relationships are not binary opposites. PSRs resemble regular relationships in many ways: they rely on the same psychological mechanisms and social skills, follow parallel developmental patterns, and trigger genuine emotions in recipients. In addition, parasocial relationships originate from a general affinity for a character rather than a deficiency, and as time passes—and the figure reveals more personal details about themselves that the audience can interpret—the sense of connection and intimacy increases.

3.3 "The Tears of Strangers Are Only Water"—Idol Economics

The idol system—and a significant part of the media industry—draws heavily upon parasocial relationships. Hence when Galbraith and Karlin state that fans are "buying an experience that resonates with emotional meaning" (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 21), we can conclude that it is the parasocial relationship cultivated by consumers that is being exploited by the agencies. Media companies are masters of establishing, maintaining, and elevating this feeling of mutual connection and proximity with idols, because they have realized its multifaceted profitability.

It is estimated that around 50-70% of Japanese TV advertisements feature a celebrity (Kilburn, 1998, p. 20; Prieler et al., 2010, p. 5; Karlin, 2012, p. 74), which is particularly high from a comparative viewpoint. Praet's multi-country study (2009) found that Japan and South Korea constituted the highest tier of celebrity endorsers out of 25 countries: in this group, every second commercial featured a famous person (49% in Japan, 61.1% in South Korea), whereas this figure was less than 15% in most European countries (9.1% in Finland, 3.9% in Switzerland).

These commercials or CMs are an essential avenue of profit for the agencies and the idols. In this flourishing business, a one-year contract for a tie-up with a top idol can cost a company ¥50–100 million (€370–750 000) (Karlin, 2012, p. 74), and Johnny's idols

certainly belong to the true elite of the entertainment industry, especially when it comes to commercials. For instance, an infamous lipstick campaign for Kanebo Cosmetics featuring Kimura Takuya (a member of the idol group SMAP) in 1996 got allegedly so popular that the promotional posters started to disappear from train stations (Tanikawa, 1996; Schilling, 1997, as cited in Darling-Wolf, 2003, p. 76). SMAP's popularity proved to be rather long-lasting as it continued throughout the next two decades, and Kimura was crowned as the CM King[29] of Japan for five consecutive years between 2005 and 2009 (Nihon Monitor, 2018). Since then, Arashi has taken up the baton: in the past 10 years, Sakurai Shō and Aiba Masaki won the title 6 times combined. In 2020, Arashi absolutely dominated the CM King list, since the top 5 positions of the ranking were solely taken up by Arashi members (Nihon Monitor, 2020). Ninomiya Kazunari, who came in last among the members in the fifth place, represented 13 companies, while Imada Mio and Hirose Suzu won the CM Queen title with 14 contracts respectively.

It is not only the quantity of endorsements that matters, but the quality too. A tie-up contract with one of the three largest mobile phone companies (SoftBank, KDDI/au, and NTT Docomo) is considered a real pinnacle of success, since these corporations account for over half of the commercials aired in Japan (Karlin, 2012, p. 75)—SMAP was hired for a tie-up with SoftBank, Arashi was associated with the KDDI/au brand. In addition, Arashi has represented other prestigious companies such as Japanese Airlines, Japan Post, Nintendo, and Nissan, and they also provided the theme song for the 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2020/2021 Olympics coverage on NTV.

The key to assessing how exactly the entertainment industry harnesses PSR for profit is first understanding audiences—or more precisely, the way audiences are perceived and targeted as potential consumers by producers. What parasocial relationships with celebrities bring to the table is a form of borrowed interest, or as de Grandpré (2001, pp. 94–95) puts it: "famous people offer advertisers relationships with which they can communicate with the purchasing public," and their familiarity and connection to their fans and followers can trigger a kind of engagement that a one-shot ad cannot easily compete with. Using celebrities as spokespeople is certainly not a new invention[30], but the popularity of celebrity endorsement as a marketing tactic continues to rise.

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[29] The titles CM King and CM Queen are given to the male and female performer with the highest number of commercial affiliations in a given year.

[30] The concept dates back to the 19th century, when Queen Victoria was associated with Cadbury's Cocoa (Erdogan, 1999, as cited in Akturan, 2011, p. 1281). In Japan, some date the earliest examples of celebrity endorsement back to 1907 (Skov & Moeran, 1995, as cited in Praet, 2001, p. 1), and Kilburn (1998) notes that it was already prevalent in the early 1970s.

As the mass media landscape is becoming even more fragmented and cluttered, especially due to the prevalence of technological convergence and the internet, a new type of viewership has emerged that theorists Abercrombie and Longhurst have labeled as a diffused audience. For this group, television viewing is no longer regarded as a special event, and their attention is simultaneously splintered in so many directions that it is considered inattention (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, as cited in Stevens, 2011, p. 43). This creates new challenges for marketers. First, there is currently a surplus of capacity to produce material things with which the net capacity to consume these goods simply cannot keep up. Secondly, since distribution costs are becoming vanishingly low due to the internet, consumers are constantly bombarded with ads to buy more products and services than they could ever try. As Herbert A. Simon has put it: "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (1971, p. 40).

In this system, that Michael H. Goldhaber (1997) has coined[31] the **attention economy**, human attention has become the ultimate resource and a monetizable commodity. Since exposure or repetition does not guarantee that an ad is going to be really seen or listened to by a diffused audience, other marketing strategies had to be employed in order to increase effective reach, and celebrities are treasured for their ability to break through the commercial clutter (Praet, 2001, p. 2). Firms compete to "command eyeballs," and those who can deliver public attention are in high demand, be it politicians, old-fashioned celebrities, such as musicians or actors, or an entirely new species of promoters: regular people who made a career out of their large social media following. Perhaps nothing is a truer testimony to the real monetary potential of parasocial relationships than influencers: a term that in its current meaning as a job title only started to gain traction after 2016 (Solomon, n.d.), yet the influencer marketing industry is estimated to be worth up to $15 billion (€12.3 billion) by 2022 (Schomer n.d.). Well-known personalities are sought after because they offer two main services that companies desperately need but might struggle to achieve on their own: **a transfer of attention** and a **transfer of meaning** (Akturan, 2011, p. 1280).

Regarding the first function, it is perhaps useful to investigate the power dynamics behind corporate alliances with popular personalities. Of course, celebrity endorsements and sponsorships work symbiotically in the sense that the promoter too gains additional exposure through advertising the product—and with the advantage of not needing to

[31] The term is often incorrectly attributed to Esther Dyson (e.g. de Grandpré, 2001, p. 93, or even on Encyclopedia.com, n.d.), but Dyson has asseverated that, to the best of their knowledge, the theory originally came from Goldhaber (Dyson & Roberts, 2003).

spend anything on the campaign. Yet it is the celebrity who is getting paid in addition, and not the other way around. But why?

An intriguing explanation can be found in Goldhaber's essay (1997) on the relationship between attention and money in an attention economy. As they point out, attention is intrinsically tied to individuals rather than to organizations. A person whom the audience is already accustomed to paying attention to has the power to influence not only the way other people think and act (more on this in Chapter 3.4.4), but can also share or redirect the received attention to others, including products and brands, which then may bask in this reflected glory.

Companies often need a middleman because while fame can be translated into money rather easily, money cannot reliably buy attention—it's not sufficient in itself, unless it offers something more to spark people's interest. In other words, "[m]oney flows to attention, and much less well does attention flow to money." Goldhaber considers this as supporting evidence for an ongoing shift toward an economy where attention is the primary kind of property, and material goods come only second, as "the old kind of wealth easily flows to the holders of the new" (Goldhaber, 1997). Goldhaber projected that an increasing amount of people would use the internet for getting attention as individuals, without any organizational ties, and in response, a full-fledged economy will emerge to facilitate the ubiquitous transmission and circulation of attention. To their credit, Goldhaber made these claims long before the social media boom, in 1997—so seven years prior to the beginning of social media as we know it.[32]

In Japan, celebrity endorsements are favored due to their potential to generate topicality (*wadaisei*), meaning that the audience will talk about the commercial if a celebrity is included in it (Praet, 2001, p. 2). For instance, Karlin (2012, pp. 87–88) mentions the success of Nintendo's campaign featuring Arashi, which was able to preliminarily boost the pre-orders of the "Wii Party" video game. Two weeks before the game's release, it was ranked 68th on sales rankings, however, after airing the commercials, it made it to the top 5—before the game was even launched. Moreover, employing idols also offers another advantage: they are able to link different media sites together and, thus, they can create an advertisement campaign that appears as interconnected and comprehensive (Praet, 2001, p. 3).

[32] This is arguable of course, however, MySpace has reached the milestone of a million monthly active users in 2004, and it was also the year when the first version of Facebook was launched. For a more detailed account of the rise of social media platforms, see Ortiz-Ospina, 2019.

In addition to this "borrowed interest," fame can also be exploited for its potential to transfer meaning to brands. When celebrities endorse or simply interact with a product, they lend it instant recognizability and likability (Akturan, 2011, p. 1280). In the consumers' mind, the public image of the endorser gets associated with the brand, and it grants a distinct "flavor" and character to a product which is, in reality, devoid of it. In Japan, where potential consumers are presented with an overwhelming array of similar goods, product proliferation becomes essential in order to differentiate between products and to cultivate long-lasting customer loyalty (Stevens, 2011, p. 41). Praet (2001, p. 3) also notes that not only are celebrities able to differentiate among goods, they can also replace the product concept, and they can function as "shared vocabulary" between the agency and the client.

Some of these meanings are based on emotions. As Martin (2005, p. 73) explains, Japanese advertising prefers a "soft sell" approach which sets a good atmosphere, and they prefer hedonic rather than rational appeals. Lukács (2010) argues that the culture industries in Japan increasingly operate on affect, where idols as image commodities are used to transfer their affective capacities onto products, thus they transform objects to "emotionalized communication tools" (p. 205). Stevens (2011) offers an illustrative example of this process discussing a 2009 Softbank commercial featuring SMAP. In a television interview with the idol group about shooting the rather grandiose advertisement, SMAP members were joking about how the commercial did not really even feature a phone. When one of them teasingly asks "What is the commercial about, then?", another member answers: "We are Softbank." This is underpinned by the commercials themselves where slogans such as "Smap [sic] → Softbank" and "Smap [sic] = Softbank" are displayed over the screen (Stevens, 2011, pp. 47–48). Through the parasocial relationship, the affects that are associated with the image commodity get transferred to the product they endorse and fill it with meaning.

3.4 The Five Ps of Parasocial Profitability

The previous chapter outlined the exploitation of parasocial relationships by the media industry, mostly concentrating on how audiences are targeted and how stars transfer attention and meaning. This chapter, on the other hand, will focus on the audience's experience and why these strategies work on them. In the following, I will offer a very brief summary of the academic literature on the side effects and reception phenomena associated with parasocial phenomena. While celebrity endorsements are certainly a

common method of capitalizing on these relationships, their impact is multifaceted and extends well beyond product promotions.

For clarity, I have organized the discussion into five sections: prediction, pleasure, presence, persuasion, and perception. These are intentionally oversimplified categories, and the original literature naturally use a lot more complex models, e.g., Shrum (2012) separates intended effects from unintended ones, and Klimmt et al. (2006) differentiates between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects, while Carpenter and Green (2012) refer to cognitive, affective, and participatory responses. The five categories I introduce here are merely used to introduce some of these concepts in an easily digestible manner, and my primary objective here is to provide "a bigger picture." By tying practice into theory, I briefly explore how certain characteristics of the idol industry in Japan could be integrated into and benefit from this rather multidisciplinary and complex framework.

3.4.1 Prediction

Galbraith and Karlin argue that idols are indispensable to the Japanese entertainment industry because they "organize the market into fan communities that allow predictable patterns of viewership and consumption" (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 7). This seems to be somewhat universal, since the same is noted by Frith (1987, p. 68) in regards to the U.S. record industry's business strategies. They explain that since companies cannot reliably control the public taste, their best option is to minimize risk, and "stars are the best guarantors of success record companies can get" because their albums may reach the platinum level even preceding their release.

This is consistent with the current research on parasocial phenomena. PSI and PSR indeed seem to be key factors when it comes to viewing motives and predicting the audience's possible future engagement with a program or character (Giles, 2002, Tuchakinsky, 2010, Kyewsky et al., 2016). Conway and Rubin (1991), for instance, found that PSI may be a better predictor of TV viewing than many other behavioral measures or the program content itself. As Klimmt et al. (2006, p. 307) note, "virtually all theoretical accounts of media selection […] highlight the importance of past media experience for future decisions on media consumption," and this also applies to prior parasocial processes experienced with media personae. In other words, since people extrapolate from their history with a performer, their motivation to reselect a media product is often determined by whether they found the prior exposure to a persona gratifying. Therefore, PSRs have a crucial influence on future selection behavior.

As Lukács (2010) explains, the main leads in television dramas are of utmost importance, and they are often chosen before the stories are written. Directors and producers consider idols like Kimura Takuya as precious capital investments that need to be handled with great care, because they have the potential to yield enormous profits (Lukács, 2010, p. 84). The cast does seem to wield quite some influence over the audience's selection of content. For instance, drama critic Narima Reiichi published a book (2010) titled *TV Dorama wa, Janīzu Mono Dake Miro!* ("When it comes to TV dramas, only watch the ones with Johnny's talents!"), where he explores why he mostly finds the dramas that feature Johnny's talents and Arashi enjoyable.

3.4.2 Pleasure

Part of the reason why Narima finds Johnny's dramas so pleasurable may be that a stronger parasocial relationship toward a character on a TV show leads to a higher level of thrill and suspense, and increased viewing satisfaction and evaluations (Perse and Rubin, 1989, Hartmann et al., 2008). In addition, findings indicate that typical side effects include a more intense emotional and cognitive involvement: high attention, stronger emotional experiences, high relaxation, and decreased emotional stress (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 15). As Klimmt et al. (2006) have concluded: "affective PSI processes certainly display the strongest affinity to experiential phenomena that belong to the concept of media entertainment, such as enjoyment, fun, and pleasure" (p. 306). For instance, even simple tactics like changing the presenter's bodily and verbal cues (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1106) or "breaking the fourth wall" by directly or indirectly addressing the audience (Auter & Davis, 1991) lead to a stronger parasocial experience. Moreover, they are also associated with a higher level of user involvement and entertainment, and make the content appear to be more complex and sophisticated. The intensity of PSI is also affected by the nature of the already existing PSR with the featured persona and vice versa: each interaction informs the mental representation of the viewer's relationship with the performer in the social network inventory in their mind (Klimmt et al., 2006, pp. 303–304).

In consistency with this, Darling-Wolf (2004a, p. 359) observes that Japanese women identify the proximity or closeness (*mijika na*) as one of the most pleasurable characteristics of Japanese popular culture. Similarly, Lukács (2010) notes:

> My most pertinent observation was that viewers did not seem to enjoy discussing the stories of trendy dramas with me. They seemed more comfortable chatting about the *tarento* who were also the center of drama discussions on anonymous

> blog sites and other Internet-based drama forums. Indeed, I never ceased to be surprised by the massive amount of knowledge viewers acquired about the *tarento*. (p. 19, italicization by me)

In summation, parasocial interactions are significant sources of fun in themselves, to which other sorts of pleasures then may also contribute.

3.4.3 Presence

Strong PSI is often associated with a higher level of presence, the sensation of being completely immersed in a media world (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 15), a phenomenon that is also known and studied outside of the parasocial literature as narrative transportation or transportation theory. While there are several technologies that provide us with narratives, including books—the term "narrative transportation" itself originates from Richard J. Gerrig, who used it within the context of reading novels—television is among the most potent due to its rich audiovisual stimulation that facilitates immersion (Derrick et al., 2009, p. 353; Carpenter & Green, 2012, pp. 174–175).

The extent of this transportation is an individual difference variable that can change from person to person (Shrum & Lee, 2012, p. 163; Carpenter & Green, 2012, p. 184), and from exposure to exposure, but it triggers functions similar to the ones also associated with parasocial phenomena. Firstly, watching others on television enables people to mentally divert themselves from their problems and mundane lives, a practice that has been conceptualized both as an epistemic mode of pleasure and as escapism as well (Klimmt et al., 2006, p. 306), which then may contribute to the enjoyment experienced by the audience that was discussed above. Secondly, being transported into a narrative world comes with a willingness to accept the story's reality without reservation and to suspend disbelief (Carpenter & Green, 2012, pp. 170–171), which is why marketers so often utilize narratives for persuading consumers—the mechanics of this will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. And lastly, since most narratives deal with social themes, and engaging with them leads to an increase in social processing (Derrick et al., 2009, p. 353), they inevitably inform our beliefs and perception of the world, just like parasocial relationships—which is the topic of the fifth chapter.

It is perhaps not surprising to spot correlations and conflating patterns. After all, narratives and parasocial relationships are intertwined in many ways. Since, transportation theory concerns people's attitudes toward imagined worlds, which are bound to have fictional characters in them, they will always incorporate parasocial relationships. Furthermore, even attachments toward real characters such as news anchors

or politicians have elements of an ongoing narrative where each interaction informs and advances one's understanding of the persona's personality. The more familiar the face, the less illusory and one-sided the interaction feels, and the easier it is to be transported into the mediated world the persona is representing.

3.4.4 Persuasion

One critical aspect of parasocial phenomena is its effect on the cognitive and emotional engagement with media content, a feature which is incredibly valuable to marketers. Parasocial relationships not only intensify one's engagement with media content, they also decrease the critical distance to its message and shape subsequent attitudes, and the stronger the PSR, the greater this influence becomes (Song & Fox, 2016, Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 15).

The literature offers complex explanations for this. For instance, since being submerged in a different world with familiar faces is pleasurable, people are usually not inclined to interrupt the experience by critiquing the validity of the story or its characters. Moreover, narrative transportation requires cognitive resources, and the remaining mental capacity may not be sufficient for processing counterarguments (Carpenter & Green, 2012, p. 174). Furthermore, people process entertainment (narrative) information differently than how they interact with promotional (rhetorical) content (Shrum, 2012, Knoll et al., 2015, pp. 720–721). This is what makes product integration so potent: it successfully mixes commercial messages with non-commercial ones while the viewers might remain relatively unaware of a deliberate promotion taking place. Not only does this make this marketing strategy more difficult to avoid (Cowley, 2012, p. 37), it also makes it less annoying and more enjoyable to the audience. Thus, when the lines are blurred and an ulterior motive is less detectable, audiences are more susceptible to persuasion (Shrum, 2012, Knoll et al., 2015, pp. 720–721).

In addition, the medium which the information is propagated through may influence its persuasiveness as well, since images and videos are more resistant to verbal counterarguments (Carpenter & Green, 2012, p. 175). As Dyer (1991a, p. 135) notes, the camera's truth is partly believed because a photograph is always a photograph of something; a person had to be present in order for it to be taken. One tangible example of this is the lingering fright effect of horror movies, where media stimuli can evoke long-term changes in behavior regardless of the rationality of the fear. For instance, some people feel the need to keep an eye on the bathroom door after watching Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* while taking a shower, or some viewers of *Jaws* do not dare to ever

swim in the ocean again, notwithstanding the improbability of an actual shark attack (Harrison & Cantor, 1999).

In addition to its use in marketing (as discussed in Chapter 3.3.), the persuasiveness of parasocial phenomena can be harnessed to impact voting decisions (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 15), and it can also serve socially beneficial aims. For instance, PSR might be used in health communication such as cancer prevention campaigns (Carpenter & Green, 2012, p. 177), and can compel people to donate their organs (Carpenter & Green, 2012, p. 177, Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 15). For instance, Japanese girl idols became "one-day police officers" to remind people to follow traffic rules on behalf of the National Police Agency, and they participated in the Ministry of Heath's anti-drug campaigns as well (Aoyagi, 2004, p. 148).

A more recent and rather acute example for this comes from Arashi. In response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, they have uploaded an instructional video to their official YouTube account on how to properly wash hands based on the official guidelines of the Ministry of Health, which was viewed over a million times (Arashi, 2020b). They also produced a song titled *Wash Your Hands* (with an accompanying choreography, of course) to really drive the point home, which has currently reached over 3.2 million viewers (Arashi, 2020a).

3.4.5 Perception (of Reality)

Finally, the fifth effect of parasocial phenomena that I will highlight is PSR's impact on people's beliefs and normative perceptions about social reality, a concept that is particularly relevant for this thesis and perhaps for social sciences in general.

Technologies that seem asocial on the surface, such as television, serve a social function and mentally stimulate social interactions in those who regularly consume the narratives they offer (Derrick, 2009). In other words, regular media expresses social and cultural patterns, and the consumption of these "cultivates" our beliefs of the world, therefore it plays a role in people's socialization into standardized behaviors—a concept that became a basic tenet of cultivation theory. This idea was first formulated by George Gerbner in the 1960s, and since then it has since generated a wide range of literature in the field of mass communication.

Cultivation theory posits that mass media presents us with stories that constitute a systematic dramatization and distortion of reality, and that long-term, repeated exposure to the dominant messages of these formulaic stories will consequently come to mean something to its most avid consumers (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 349, Shrum & Lee,

2012). Research has examined how portrayals of the most pervasive images in television content regarding, for instance, violence, race and ethnicity, gender, or certain occupations affect people's conceptions of social reality over a long period of time. The findings indicate that "television viewing makes a small but consistent contribution to viewers' beliefs and perspectives" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 340). Even though the effects are, for the most part, indeed limited and are not always consistently obtained, they are not trivial and they should not be dismissed. As Shrum & Lee discuss (2012, p. 149), even very small shifts can have important and enduring consequences (e.g., on the public opinion on voting and climate change), and small overall effects may be masking much larger ones within certain groups. While television does not necessarily affect one's perception of their own personal reality, the media may play a substantial role in shaping beliefs about the world in general (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 343). For example, researchers found that there is a positive correlation between the length of exposure to television violence and the so-called "mean world syndrome," a cognitive bias where people perceive the world to be more dangerous than it actually is, and this may even predict people's subsequent engagement in taking protective measures against crimes (Shrum, 1995, p. 404, Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339, Shrum & Lee, 2012, pp. 150–151).

Although early cultivation research originally focused on the effects of overall television viewing, later studies have explored the effect of exposure to specific genres. For instance, the consumption of romantic programming (e.g. romantic dramas that idols frequently feature in) influences one's romantic beliefs, including the intention to marry and the idealized expectations of marriage (Song & Fox, 2016, p. 200), while heavy viewing in married individuals may lead to a higher perceived cost of marriage and lower commitment. As Lukács (2010) also notes: "[b]y reinforcing dominant visions of normalcy, television fulfills an ideological function" (p. 34), and it also plays an important role in identity formation. To conclude, not only do idols reflect the social contexts they were constructed in, they also shape the audience's perceptions and expectations of the world around them.

3.5 Fan—Idol Relationships

Chapter 3.2 summarized the existing theories on idol—fan relationships from the perspective of production, and Chapter 3.4 introduced some of the general characteristics of PSR that the audiences experience. In this chapter, I will outline the current theories

on the female fandom of male idols specifically, and how their meaning-making processes are interpreted in the existing academic literature.

The work of two authors will be discussed in depth: Karniol's maternal gaze theory (2012) and Nagaike's (2012) interpretation of idols as androgynous *shōnen* icons that are merely "pseudo-sexual." They are similar to each other in the sense that they both rely on psychoanalytic theory and understand the gaze of female fans as gendered and asexual.

3.5.1 Motherboy: Karlin's Maternal Gaze Theory

Jason G. Karlin (2012) explores the relationship between television advertising and fan audiences, and they also offer an analysis on why female fans, many of whom are married with children, are drawn to male idols. Numerous women characterize their relationships to male idols as that of a "virtual mother" (e.g. Matsumoto, 2007, p. 48), and being a fan forms an important part of their identity. Karlin (2012), hence, argues that fans' desire toward male idols is strictly asexual, and women are "looking at their bodies not sexually, but in the way of a mother who is attentive to her child" (p. 81), thus, coining the term "maternal gaze." They claim that this "distinctly feminine identificatory pleasure is gendered differently from the male experience of visual pleasure" (p. 81), since Karlin understands male pleasure to be scopophilic[33] and women's gaze as intrinsically asexual. They further comment in a footnote that women support male idols "to compensate for their lack of power within a patriarchal system" and that "male idols give to the woman the phallus she lacks[34] within the male economy of power in contemporary Japan" (p. 90). As it is implied by the wording here, the text relies on psychoanalytic theories, namely, the studies of Donald Winnicott (1987, 1992) and Daniel Stern (1998), which concern mother—infant relationships. Karlin identifies certain patterns of fan behavior and situates them in this psychoanalytic framework. Chapter 4.1.2 offers an overview on why the employment of psychoanalytic theories can be problematic and what methodological limitations should be considered when employing them as a framework, furthermore, I also discuss whether female gaze is asexual indeed or not. Here, first I would like to merely reflect upon whether the examples of fan behavior that Karlin mentions can be considered "distinctly feminine," and whether these are "gendered differently" from the male fans' experience.

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[33] Scopophilia is a Freudian term that refers to the "pleasure in looking," i.e., deriving pleasure from looking, which correlates to the concept of voyeurism and exhibitionism in psychoanalytic theory.

[34] This is perhaps meant as a reference to "penis envy," another Freudian term, though Karlin never directly mentions Freud's name.

According to Karlin, fans' close, affective attention to the idols' facial expressions and body language is the symptom of a "primary maternal preoccupation," where mothers are attuned to their infants' emotional cues. They also describe fans' tendency to watch and closely analyze videos frame-by-frame (*koma okuri*) (p. 83) and the careful recording and cataloguing of content. However, the same has been noted about male *otaku* and fandom in general. LaMarre (2004), for instance, identifies "the overly attentive, almost obsessive viewing practices of fans" (p. 158) as a defining characteristic of (male) *otaku* culture, and explains that through this compulsive replaying ritual, fans aim to spot the tiniest nuances and trivial details. Similarly, Galbraith (2012) also notes that collection, categorization, and memorization of information about female idols is typical of male fans (p. 189, 191). Furthermore, close-ups are universally regarded as an essential tool for establishing authenticity, as humans associate subtle facial expressions with unmeditated, true emotions (Jandl, 2017, p. 184–185), and they are central to the visual style of Japanese television in general (Gerow, 2011, p. 221).

Even the vocabulary female fans use parallels *otaku* culture and male fans of female idols. For example, Karlin mentions that commenters often describe their experience with expressions like *genki ga deru* (energizing) and *iyasareru* (soothing) (2012, p. 82)—Galbraith (2012) lists these among the three most common descriptions male fans use when explaining the pleasure of their engagement with female idols (p. 196). *Moe*[35], perhaps the most emblematic term associated with *otaku* culture, is also used by Johnny's fans: Matsumoto Mika (2007), a well-known fan of Arashi who wrote a book on the subject that Karlin also references, for example dedicates an entire chapter to the "*moe* factors of Johnny's" (p. 33–47). Moreover, many Johnny's fans refer to themselves as *Jani-ota*, a label which is also featured in the title of Matsumoto's book *(Jani-Ota: Onna no Kemono Michi)*.

Karlin also notes that Johnny's fans believe that they know the true self of the idol, and they defend their actions just like a parent. This, however, is arguably a general characteristic of parasocial relationships and stardom in general. As it was discussed in Chapter 3.2.4, PSRs mimic face-to-face social interactions in many regards, and the more time a fan "spends with" a media performer, the more confident they feel about knowing their real personality. Chapter 2.3 also mentioned that for idols and influencers, establishing authenticity is of absolute importance (see the quote by Lindsay Ellis), and Chapter 3.3 explained how the industry capitalizes on it.

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[35] *Moe* refers to feelings of strong affection (typically towards fictional characters in manga and anime).

Dyer (1991a) also explores the construction of authenticity and the fascinating contradiction within star images in their essay. On one hand, it is common knowledge that stars are manufactured by the media, which is considered as the "very antithesis of sincerity and authenticity" (p. 135), yet on the other, the existence of true stars is still believed. According to Dyer, there are three aspects to consider here. First, part of the authentication is in-built, meaning that stars exist outside the media texts that they appear in—unlike fictional characters—which entails that there is indeed a real person that one can get to know. Second, photographic media helps because the camera's truth is believed. And third, the different levels or layers of a star's image reinforce each other: ironically, discourses that claim that a star is not like they appear on screen end up reinforcing the authenticity of the star image as a whole. Behind the scenes pictures of stars with little make-up, wearing casual clothes in their homes make the performer appear more credible, even though these images often are just as staged as their movie appearances. Authenticity is an essential part of the working mechanism of the star phenomenon, and the industry makes a conscious effort to construct it by placing the star in settings with "authenticity markers" that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation, and privacy. This practice is also common in Japanese television.

It has to be noted that while Karlin offers an analysis on the meaning-making processes of female fans, their primary focus is not on audiences and their approach is not exactly ethnographic[36]. The essay and the sources that are referenced are not so much centered on fans' experience and pleasure or why idols appeal to them, but on why these women buy the products male idols promote. The discussion on the "maternal gaze" constitutes only a quarter of the text, and it is embedded in a detailed analysis on television advertising and commercials. Karlin's conclusion is that "among female fans, in particular, for whom the idol is perceived in a maternal way, buying the products they endorse is a way to help foster and nurture the success of their idol's career" (2012, p. 83). However, the utilization of affective economics, i.e., the equation of buying products to emotion and nurture, is not limited to female fan groups. AKB48's election system targets mostly heterosexual male audiences with slogans like "votes are your love," and male fans take pride in supporting their favorite performers. Is this conceptually different from a maternal gaze? Furthermore, if these female fans' gaze is truly motherly, why do many

[36] Karlin states that they used fan communication on women's blogs and other social media for their analysis, but the data selection or collection process and the method applied is unfortunately not explained. Altogether six blog entries are referenced in the footnotes, all from different platforms. There is also a reference to Matsumoto Mika's book (which I will touch upon in the next paragraph) and a magazine interview, but the rest of the essay seems to be drawing on secondary sources, not actual fan accounts.

of these women support male idols exclusively? A mother's love, after all, extends to daughters as well, and supporting a very successful group like AKB48 could provide the same kind of maternal pleasures to these women.

Karlin admits that they find it "difficult to understand" why female fans embrace this motherly label so happily (2012, p. 82), considering that their primary role in society is to take care of others and act as a "good wife, wise mother" *(ryōsai kenbo)*. I think that the possible reasons become clear if we consider the context. As it was partly mentioned in Chapter 3.2.3 and Chapter 3.1, there is still considerable stigma associated with idol fandom. This is apparent in many of the books written by fans, which usually include lengthy repudiations of this pathologizing rhetoric right at the start. For instance, Matsumoto (2007) begins her book with describing how *Jani-ota* are considered to be losers and gross, superficial women who are into young guys (p. 8–10), and only then proceeds with a rebuttal claiming that she wanted to marry the members of Hikaru Genji when she was younger, but now, at her age, she only looks at idols the way people enjoy famous paintings (p. 10).

However, the language she uses to describe the fans'—and her own—gaze is of interest. She says that when she looks at idols, she feels like a young girl in love, with a thrill in her heart[37]. Furthermore, when she explains that an idol's character can make their looks a lot more appealing, she uses the term *koi no megane* (eyeglasses or spectacles of love) (p. 34). *Koi* is a curious choice of a word here, since Japanese language distinguishes between certain categorizations of love. In a similar vein to the difference between the concept of *eros* and *agape*, *koi* is a romantic or passionate love, a feeling based on sexual attraction, while *ai* is a general feeling of selfless love. A lover's infatuation is *koi*, but a mother's love is most definitely not. This suggests that while Matsumoto talks about herself as a "virtual mother" looking at a painting, her gaze itself is still very much sexual.

With a sensitive topic like women's sexuality, the importance of context should be carefully considered. The social stigma surrounding the idol fandom, which is described so vividly in fan accounts (e.g. Matsumoto, 2007, p. 8–9; Takeuchi, 2009, p. 11–23; mikīru, 2014, p. 36–37; 74), triggers a salient level of defensiveness in these fans. Considering that Matsumoto has a career as a well-known comedian, and she published the book under her real name with her photo featured on its dust jacket, it is perhaps understandable why she publicly identifies with the socially acceptable mother label

[37] "Mochiron karera o mite iru saichū wa, kimochi dake wa jūdai e taimu surippu, koi suru otome ka no yō ni omeme uruuru mune ga kyunkyun to wa narimasu yo." (Matsumoto, 2007, p. 11)

rather than with the commonly held image of a repulsive pervert. In order to study such sensitive matters, researchers need to establish a level of trust and a safe environment.

One outstanding example of this is Ho's (2012) ethnographic study on the fans of South Korean actor Bae Yong Joon that relies on interviews with 36 "Yon-sama" fans in Japan. In consistency with Karlin's notion of a motherly gaze, many of Ho's informants initially insisted that their admiration for Bae Yong Joon was merely wishing that they had a son or a son-in-law like him. However, after years of fieldwork, Ho managed to gain these fans' trust, many of them opened up about their real feelings and "admitted that their desires were never those of a mother for a son, but of a woman for a man. Yon-sama is like a 'lover,' not a 'son'" (p. 175). Note how one of the informants (Nomura, a 57-year-old housewife from Sendai) directly attributes her reluctance to confess her real desires to shame:

> Nomura […] insisted that Yon-sama was merely the ideal a mother has for a son or son-in-law. When I met Nomura for the fourth time, […] her discourse had shifted to love, desire, and fantasy. She explained that embarrassment had prevented her from admitting this openly to me in the past, since a woman at her age is generally regarded as devoid of erotic desire, uninterested in fantasy, and even unconcerned with seeking sexual gratification. In reality, for her, idolizing Yon-sama has always been about love, desire, and fantasy—all of which help her feel like a "real woman" again. (p. 175)

Ho provides us with an insightful analysis on the social realities these women are embedded in. Older women, especially those with children, are often reduced to their image as a caretaker and become de-sexualized—or as one of their informants put it: "[t]hey don't perceive us as women, or as human beings with feelings, desires and fantasies" (p. 174). Ho thus argues that these fans' adoration for Yon-sama is a "reclamation of female desire and redefinition of femininity in a society that has ignored their emotional needs by assuming that middle-aged women—especially those who are mothers—are de-sexualized and de-eroticized beings" (p. 168). Notably, many of the fans in Ho's study use expressions similar to Matsumoto's to describe their feelings, e.g., they claim that Yon-sama makes them feel like a young woman again (p. 176).

I thus argue that with a sensitive subject like female desire that tends to be either completely overlooked or pathologized, research needs to consider and account for the surrounding stigma and social factors. This is not to rule out that some female fans look at idols in a motherly way, which is certainly a possibility, and I do not claim that all

women look at idols in a sexual way either. However, it is crucial to underline that social contexts and possible restraints should be considered in the discussion, especially if the topic concerns real audiences and controversial topics such as female sexuality—as I will further argue in Chapter 4.1.

3.5.2 Nagaike's "Pseudo-Sexual" *Shōnen* Theory

The next theory I discuss is Nagaike's (2012) whose focus is more on consumption, meaning the actual experience of fans than on production. However, they also rely on a textual analysis of published interviews and books written by idols and fans as a method and use psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework, just like Karlin, rather than an ethnographic approach.

Nagaike first examines idols as "empty" icons and their image as an androgynous *shōnen* (young man or boy). They argue that these performers lack mature masculinity and sexual connotations, which, according to psychoanalysis, positions them somewhere between the binary category of men and women. Nagaike suggests that women fictionalize male idols in such a way because they do not want to accept their real male identities, "Johnny's idols can thus also be read as a reflection of a subconscious female denial of the patriarchal, masculine male" (2012, p. 104). Based on this theory, female fans dislike sexual scandals and the marriages of male idols, such as Kimura Takuya, because they want to pretend that male idols lack sexuality, and Nagaike argues that this forces Johnny's to avoid overtly sexual images (p. 105–106). This chapter will engage with this theory and reflect on two central topics: first, whether idol images are indeed presented as virginal in media, and second, whether female fans perceive them in an asexual way.

It is certainly true that product promotions in Japan generally avoid sexualizing male idols or sexualization in general, as Karlin also observed (2012), since sexual themes in advertisements are considered to be unappealing to female target groups (p. 77). However, if one widens the scope beyond commercials and includes other media texts that fans eagerly consume—such as idols' roles in romantic dramas and movies, concert footages, and appearances in women's magazines—idol images become a lot more complex and often less family-friendly. *An An* magazine for example often has special issues that include semi-nude shots with popular male actors and idols, e.g., SMAP's Kimura Takuya, Arashi's Matsumoto Jun and Sakurai Shō were all featured in these editions. I included some of these pictures (Figure 2) to attest the notion that overtly

sexual images of Johnny's talents are indeed available in mainstream media and that the industry seems to consciously cater to gazes that are not so motherly in nature.

Figure 2

Johnny's idols in popular women's magazine An An.

Note. Kimura Takuya (on the top) from SMAP in issue no. 1118 (1998, May 1–8, pp. 11–12.); Matsumoto Jun (on the bottom) from Arashi in no. 1548 (2007, February 14, pp. 21–22.), and Fujigaya Taisuke (on the right) from Kis-My-Ft2 in no. 1868 (2013, August 14–21, cover photo).

The omnipresence of idols in Japanese media necessitates that a comprehensive analysis on their overall image thus has to target several cultural sites, and not only commercials. For instance, Fabienne Darling-Wolf, who has conducted the most extensive English-language academic research on SMAP and its fandom up to this date (2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c), published a textual analysis on Kimura Takuya's image (2003) that included not only the three major avenues of his media appearances—music performances, television dramas, and magazines—but also various other texts such as concert videos, other television appearances, commercials, his radio shows, and online fan communities. With all these sites taken into account, Darling-Wolf's study offered a radically contrasting view on Kimura's image. While Nagaike (2012) claims that male

idol images lack masculinity and sexual connotations, Darling-Wolf (2003) identifies these idols as explicit sex objects:

> Multiple additional media sites provide opportunities for women to enjoy the actor's sex appeal. He can be heard on the radio talking about his consumption of pornography, his masturbating habits, or his favorite sexual positions; he is featured in tabloid newspapers in all sorts of suggestive situations—as when he was caught urinating outside. A recently released photographic account of SMAP's 2001 concert tour caught him with his boxers halfway down (2003, p. 77).

Interestingly, both Darling-Wolf and Nagaike mention the same Kanebo commercial from 1996 (that this thesis also briefly referenced in Chapter 3.3). For Nagaike, the fact that Kimura is wearing (his fictitious girlfriend's) red lipstick in the commercial signals lack of masculinity and sexuality (2012, p. 103). For Darling-Wolf, it is "one of the milestone attempts at establishing Kimura's sex appeal" (2003, p. 76).

This striking difference in interpretation stems from different characterizations of androgyny. Nagaike defines androgyny as the absence of mature masculinity arguing that the *shōnen* is not a man (nor a woman or a girl) as it incorporates differing gender identities, and according to psychoanalytic theory, which has a rather rigid and essentialist understanding of sex roles, it also follows that it therefore lacks sexuality. For Darling-Wolf, on the other hand, androgyny is but one layer of the multiple, sometimes contrasting masculinities that Kimura embodies. In addition to his portrayal of a sex object and a tough guy, he is shown as a man "who is in touch with his feminine side"—he is known to be a good cook, he is comfortable handling children, and he is definitely not afraid to cry. Contrary to Nagaike, Darling-Wolf identifies this hybridity as a new form of masculinity that was "clearly developed for female sexual enjoyment" (Darling-Wolf, 2003, p. 77).

It is important to highlight that androgyny can be and is sexualized, especially in the Japanese cultural and historical context. Japanese theater has a long tradition of male actors performing female roles, and similarly, female actors embody male characters in Takarazuka Revue, for example. Even outside Japan, rock stars often are somewhat androgynous. Elvis wore eyeliner, and many popular male performers are known to wear feminine dresses and frilly blouses, occasionally even high heels, e.g., Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Jimmy Hendrix, Prince, Billy Idol, or Kurt Cobain, just to name a few—

yet they embody the epitome of masculinity and sex appeal for many, even among their heterosexual male fan base.

Adolescent girls' fascination toward male media stars with feminine attributes has been conceptualized as a transition into sexuality. Karniol (2001) for example concludes that these performers serve as a safe love object for practicing feeling norms for teenagers, since they cannot threaten their status as good girls due to their inaccessibility. It is not only young girls who find androgyny attractive, however. Perrett et al. (1998) observed that when Japanese and Caucasian subjects were asked to rate the attractiveness of both female and male face shapes, there was a cross-population consistency in the preference for feminized to masculinized or average male faces, and this tendency applied across nationality, sex and both Japanese and Caucasian face types. Enhancing the masculinity of the facial characteristics increased the perception of negative traits such as dishonesty, emotional coldness, and uncooperativeness. Furthermore, as Miller (2006) notes, while a hairy chest used to be a symbol of manliness, since the late 1980s, it is no longer so. In a popular poll survey among Japanese women about the most disliked qualities of a man's body, hirsuteness was the most appalling: chest hair, body hair, leg hair, and beards took the first four places. Even for adult men, smoothness is the new beauty ideal. Therefore, it seems plausible that androgyny does not foreclose masculinity or sexual attraction, quite on the contrary: it may even contribute to the idols' sex appeal.

In fact, these young *shōnen* or *bishōnen* seem to consciously target the gaze of middle-aged women, which is often evident in the roles they play in television dramas. Arashi member Matsumoto Jun, for instance, portrayed the love interest of older women in several productions at the start of his career. In *Gokusen* (2002, Nippon TV), he played the male lead, a high school student who falls in love with his teacher (the romance remains implicit in the series, but in the manga that the drama is based on the characters end up together). In *Kimi wa Petto* (You're My Pet, 2003, TBS)—which is one of Matsumoto's most iconic roles—the female protagonist, who is an ambitious career woman approaching her thirties, finds an injured, 20-year-old man on the street and decides to take him in as a "pet." While their relationship starts out as a platonic coping mechanism for the female lead's depression and anxiety, it later turns into a sexual relationship, and the woman leaves her fiancé for Matsumoto's character. *Tokyo Tower*, a 2005 Japanese romantic movie, focuses on two male university students' affairs with older, married women. Matsumoto, who was 22 years old at the time, had explicit erotic scenes with his partner Terajima Shinobu, who was playing a 35-year-old housewife.

The casting decisions in these shows imply that producers' have a clear intention to package and circulate young male idols as valid love and sex objects for the middle-aged female target audience. The success of these dramas seems to indicate that viewers indeed find these images attractive, which brings us to the second point—the nature of this appeal. Nagaike argues that fans fictionalize male idols as non-sexual regardless of what the producers' intentions were due to their subconscious denial of mature masculinity, and the asexual *shōnen* image is thus representative of the audience's wishes rather than the industry's efforts. In other words, even if we conclude that idol images are indeed sexualized in media, which I have argued for so far, it still does not necessarily entail that audiences are sexually attracted to them. However, women themselves seem to claim so: SMAP's Kimura Takuya was voted "The Guy We'd Most Like to Have Sex With" in *An An* magazine for ten consecutive years (Miller, 2006, p. 125; Nagaike, 2012, p. 106). Similarly, Johnny's talents have consistently secured prominent positions on such lists, for instance, Arashi's Aiba Masaki was ranked first on Oricon's "Male Celebrity I Want as a Lover" list this year again, and Sakurai Shō ranked fourth (Oricon, 2021). Interestingly, Nagaike acknowledges the *An An* survey's findings, yet they dismiss it by claiming that it does not actually indicate that women are sexually attracted to idols. Nagaike argues that "the phrase 'the guy we'd most like to have sex with' should not be taken as a literal expression of female sexual desires" (2012, p. 106), because the idol images are fictionalized by the audience, therefore desire here is "essentially imaginative." They conclude: "[i]n this context, female fans' 'sexual' desire can be termed 'pseudo-sexual' desire, precisely because Johnny's idols themselves can be characterized as 'pseudo-real'" (p. 106). Nagaike later uses the term "pseudo-intimacy" to refer to the relationship between fans and idols, which seems to be yet another synonym for parasocial relationships.

In other words, Nagaike seems to imply that the one-sided nature of these relationships entails that the feelings triggered are not real. However, if we reconceptualize this "pseudo-realness" and "pseudo-intimacy" in the theoretical framework of parasocial phenomena that I introduced in Chapter 3.2, which summarized decades of academic study in the field, we can conclude that research suggests otherwise. To reiterate, the interaction between fans and idols may be illusory, but the mediated experience itself is real. PSRs rely on the same psychological mechanisms and social skills as real-life relationships and they also follow parallel developmental patterns—the differences are of degree, not of kind. The real and parasocial are thus not binary opposites but rather a continuum of the ortho- and the parasocial, where intermediate positions are possible.

Furthermore, imagination plays an influential role in forming and maintaining real social interactions with others. For instance, one can develop a crush on someone they barely know, not to mention fantasy's role in sexuality. If one equates the "essentially imaginative" quality of a relationship with a dismissal of the validity of the accompanying feelings, then for example porn consumption becomes pseudo-sexual as well, since the interaction only takes place in the imagination of the viewer.

Moreover, Nagaike's argument should extend to male fans of female idols too, since they are just as "pseudo-real" as Johnny's—if not more so. Yet studies on female idols, including completely fictional virtual idols such as Hatsune Miku, usually problematize the manufactured femininity these images represent (especially since the producers and managers involved in the creation of these icons are typically male), nonetheless, they do not ever question that the appeal of these entertainers stems at least partially from sexual enjoyment (e.g., Aoyagi, 2004; LaMarre, 2004; Aoyagi, 2005; Black, 2012; Galbraith, 2012). Unfortunately, none of the books and essays on my reading list explore the similarities or contrasts between female and male fan behavior or how *otaku* studies fit into the wider theoretical framework of fan studies—which would be particularly interesting, since, while *otaku* are presumed to be male, the field of fan studies originates from studying overwhelmingly female fan communities. Instead, both Karlin's maternal gaze and Nagaike's pseudo-sexual theory set out to position female fandom on a distinctly gendered conceptual terrain by default, and their findings were then interpreted in this rigid, binary framework.

As Roberson and Suzuki (2003) warn, academia is often complicit in the reproduction of gender ideologies, therefore, scholars should recognize and critically assess the influence of these doxas on their work. Both texts in this chapter assume female fandom to be conceptually different from male *otaku*, and insist that the female fan gaze is inherently asexual. The possibility that at least part of the pleasure women experience may be sexually charged is not even entertained, hence the pleasure in looking remains the prerogative of the other gender. This curious duality has prompted a more focused objective for this research: locating a potentially sexual female fan gaze, which is the topic of the next section.

4 Through Heart-Shaped Spectacles

4.1 Finding the Right Methodology

4.1.1 A Theoretical Minefield

Placed in the theoretical framework of fan—idol relationships which this study has so far outlined, the more specific ambition of this thesis is to explore the potential of an erotically charged female fan gaze. Since this research concerns not only how idols are portrayed in media, but also how their audiences make sense of these images, it was clear that a qualitative approach would be more fitting to this topic. Finding the right method, however, was not a straight-forward process. Chapter 3.5 summarized two theories on the gaze of female fans in detail, and this chapter will attempt to examine the wider academic setting in which this study takes place in order to outline the methodological implications that follow from this context.

As I have noted before, there seems to be a puzzling, gendered dichotomy in the field which affects this research as well, therefore a bit more elaboration is required on this topic before we continue with the discussion on gaze. I argue that the duality in question is symptomatic of a deep-running bias which becomes particularly salient if we compare the interpretation of typical fan behavior and phenomena shared by both the male and female idol fandom. In order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this double standard, I will briefly compare Galbraith's essay on female idols and their male fans in Japan (2012) to the theories of Karlin (2012) and Nagaike (2012) which I introduced in the previous chapters. All three texts were published in the same year and in the same book (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012), which makes them particularly appropriate for comparison.

I have already mentioned a couple of examples in regards to Karlin's maternal gaze theory, for example how frame-by-frame reading—which is equated to systematic information gathering and database building in male fans—is analyzed as a mother's search for an infant's emotional cues in female fans (Karlin, 2012, pp. 82–83). Similarly, close-ups, that are merely a tool to increase intimacy for the male audience (Galbraith, 2012, p. 195), become an instrument to invite a mother's gaze for women (Karlin, 2012, p. 81). Female fans' tendency to buy products that male idols promote stems from a desire to *nurture* according to Karlin (2012, p. 83), but if we switch the genders, it suddenly stems from a desire to *own* the idol (Galbraith, 2012, p. 189). When Galbraith explains that female idols' image videos usually do not feature nudity, this is explained along the

lines of the eroticism of the clothed body (p. 205)—yet when the same is noted about male idols, Nagaike argues that this signals that the image of male idols is asexual. When girl idols are banned from openly dating, it is because they need to maintain their image as available love and sex objects at all times—yet when guys are pressured to keep their relationships secret, Nagaike claims that it is precisely to *hide* that they are potential love objects (2012, pp. 105–106). When male fans insist that their love for a female idol is pure, Galbraith cautions not to take this at face value, and warns in the next sentence that this does not mean that these men do not masturbate to female idols (2012, p. 196)—yet Karlin readily embraces the mother/son narrative without considering the surrounding social stigma and shame. On the other hand, when the majority of a survey's female participants indicate that Kimura Takuya is the guy they would like to have sex with the most, Nagaike states that it cannot be taken as a literal expression of female sexual desire. Images of adolescent high-school girls are instantly and readily associated with sexuality and Japan's collective Lolita-complex, yet consuming images of half-naked adolescent boys are either a woman's way to reject sexuality and masculinity (Nagaike, 2012) or to embrace motherhood (Karlin, 2012). It seems that Suzanne Moore's words still hold relevance today when they stated that: "to suggest that women actually look at men's bodies is apparently to stumble into a theoretical minefield which holds sacred the idea that in the dominant media the look is always already structured as male" (1988, p. 45).

This bias is not limited to Japan or to pop music. Susan Fast (1999) has observed something very similar about how the erotic pleasure of female Led Zeppelin fans was completely overlooked in academia:

> It seems, for example, an oversight in Walser's otherwise incisive study that he acknowledges gay men's erotic pleasure at metal imagery, but not heterosexual women's—could it really be that women responding to his fan survey said nothing to suggest that they were physically attracted to the rock musicians they listened to and looked at? While the importance that collecting photographs of favorite rock stars holds to many female fans has been regularly noted, the idea that these photographs are sources of erotic pleasure—as opposed to "cute" or "handsome" representations of male idols, or representations of ideal but unobtainable men (wealthy, talented, famous)—is not discussed. I would suggest that this is because the idea that women do not generally enjoy sex, or that, even if they do, it is not very polite to acknowledge it, is still entrenched in our culture […]. (p. 276–277)

Interestingly, this blind-spot also extends to other fields, including hard sciences and the study of animal kingdom.[38] Discourse on female sexuality has often focused solely on motherhood and reproduction, however, as Bergner (2013, p. 55) also points out, what drives animals to mate is pleasure, and motherhood itself is not the motivator but the outcome of sexual desire. In spite of this, female desire or pleasure is often simply not seen nor researched. As Helen O'Connell, the urologist who led the first comprehensive anatomical study of the clitoris—that medical science failed to map until 1998—put it: "[i]t boils down to the idea that one sex is sexual and the other is reproductive" (O'Connell, as cited in Bergner, 2013, p. 57).

Though a detailed discussion on the partly historical roots of this bias is beyond the scope of this work, I need to emphasize the pervasiveness of this "blind spot" because it has directly affected my research. Studying a possibly sexual female gaze indeed resembles "stumbling into a theoretical minefield" where different schools of thought and self-contradictory notions clash. Retracing the origins of some of this confusion was not only vital for the verification of some of the concepts that could potentially derail my research, but it also had important implications for the methodology.

4.1.2 The F Word—A Psychoanalytical Gazebo

Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," is perhaps the most well-known milestone in the theoretical debates on the pleasures of viewership in film studies, which coined the now popular term "male gaze." Mulvey argues that there are three kinds of looks within mainstream Hollywood cinema: first, the look of the camera(man), director, and editor; second, the look of the actors within a film, and third, the spectator's look that is determined by the other two. Mulvey thus posits that the conventions of visual representation entail that all viewing is structured to satisfy the "male gaze."

While Mulvey's theory was highly useful for opening up debates on power differences in representation and inspired a great deal of scholarship on this topic, it is also problematic in many regards.[39] Many of its limitations can be retraced to its reliance on a psychoanalytic model. Mulvey's theory is essentially a framework of binary oppositions that equates sex with gender roles, where masculinity is inherently active, and femininity

[38] For instance, as Bergner argues (drawing on expert interviews and the research of Kim Wallen, James G. Pfaus, and Raul Paredes, among others) female sexual drive in monkeys and rodents was overlooked for decades as scientists presumed that males were the initiators and females played only a passive role (Bergner, 2013, pp. 43–65).

[39] For a detailed discussion, see Stacey, 1994 or Cragin & Simonds, 2006.

is passive. In this categorization, the positions are fixed, and there is no room for an active female gaze or a male erotic object.[40] Karlin's claim that men's pleasure is scopophilic and the female gaze is asexual (2012, p. 81), which I have dissected in Chapter 3.5.1, presumably originates from this theoretical framework. However, taking these notions literally, furthermore, applying them to real audiences is quite problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, the majority of Freud's theories did not age well. In the 1990s, a so-called "Freud war" took place that put the validity of many of their ideas into question, including the Oedipus complex, penis envy, castration anxiety, Freudian slips, and severe issues with Freud's methodology were uncovered. In 1996, *Psychological Science* concluded in an article titled "The Verdict on Freud" that "there is literally nothing to be said, scientifically or therapeutically, to the advantage of the entire Freudian system or any of its component dogmas" (Crews, 1996, p. 63). Psychoanalysis shifted its focus from historical truth to narrative truth, and while that meant that it severed its ties with the natural and social sciences, it was embraced by the field of comparative literature (Kihlstrom, 1994, p. 683). A detailed discussion on this, again, is well beyond the scope of this thesis[41], however, one specific question needs to be addressed here: is it really true that the female gaze is asexual?

If we look into research on people's sexual response patterns to visual stimuli, much is still debated. Some studies contend that the degree of the response is independent of biological sex (Mitricheva et al., 2019), others argue that it is not (Poeppl et al., 2020); and some have investigated its category specificity[42] (Chivers et al., 2004, 2007). What these studies agree on, however, is that both men and women get aroused by visual stimuli. The female gaze is thus far from being asexual in a biological sense.

The second major issue that complicates the gaze theory's applicability to studies with an ethnographic approach is that they have a conflicting characterization of the audience as a concept. In psychoanalytic models, which are quite commonly employed by film and

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[40] Mulvey later offered a revision on their original model (1981) where they suggest women can experience active desire, but only through oscillating between masculine and feminine narrative identifications. They write: "the female spectator's phantasy of masculinization [is] at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" (Mulvey, 1981, p. 15). Thus, the gaze remains masculine, and an active female gaze is still not possible within these confines.

[41] For a more detailed account, see Grünbaum, 1984, or Kihlstrom, 1994)

[42] These studies indicate that while heterosexual men are more aroused by female rather than male sexual stimuli, both homosexual and heterosexual women respond strongly to both male and female sexual stimuli. For women, the level of sexual activity has a bigger influence on the level of arousal than the actor's gender, while men show the opposite pattern.

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comparative literature studies, the female spectator is a hypothetical, a textual position. As a feminist film critic explains:

> I have never thought of the female spectator as synonymous with the woman sitting in front of the screen, munching her popcorn […] It is a concept which is totally foreign to the epistemological framework of the new ethnographic analysis of audiences. […] The female spectator is a concept, not a person. (Doane, 1989b, as cited in Stacey, 1994, p. 23)

Therefore, this line of studies prioritizes the values embedded in production over reception, and this has implications for their findings as well. As Stacey (1994) argues: "The reluctance to engage with questions of cinema audiences, for fear of dirtying one's hands with empirical material, has led to an inability to think about active female desire beyond the limits of masculine positionings" (p. 29). The theoretical audience here is generalized, monolithic, and ahistorical; the social contexts of reception, such as class, sexuality, nationality, are categorically ignored; and the meanings of the texts are fixed and determined along a totalistic binarism.

In reality, however, the meaning-making of actual audiences is a lot more complex process, and meanings do not solely reside in texts. Stuart Hall (1980) argued that audiences are capable of different kind of encodings of the same text: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. Since then, a fundamental shift has taken place both in cultural and audience studies, which has led to a more flexible and reader-based conceptualization of meaning-making, and many researchers "abandoned the quest to explicate the Woman trapped in the Text, to study actual women viewers/readers/interpreters of culture" (Cragin & Simonds, 2006, p. 204). A textual spectator is thus fundamentally at odds with an empirical one, and studies should address and account for this significant difference in conceptualization in their research design, especially if they employ an ethnographic approach, like Karlin (2012) and Nagaike (2012).

Since this study is interested in the experience of actual audiences, it assumes the gaze to be complex and diverse. It shall be reiterated here that when I set out to explore the potential for a female erotic gaze, I do not imply that all women look at idols this way, or that an asexual gaze is impossible. It is perfectly conceivable that some female fans indeed look at idols in a motherly way, I thus completely agree with Moore's notion that "If a female gaze exists it does not simply replicate a monolithic and masculinized stare, but

instead involves a whole variety of looks and glances—an interplay of possibilities" (Moore 1988, p. 59). An erotic gaze is but one variety of a look.

In order to study the actual, empirical spectator, an ethnographic method such as interviewing may be more appropriate than textual analysis. However, this comes with a different set of methodological difficulties. Social constraints and normative expectations affect the self-reporting of sexual attitudes and behavior, and as Alexander & Fisher's study (2003) found, and women are more inclined to tailor their answers to the existing norms when asked about these topics, thus conducting interviews may not be the best method for researching a sexual gaze. This was also demonstrated by Ho's study on Bae Yong-joon fans (2012) that I already mentioned in Chapter 3.5.1. But if textual analysis on media images cannot account for the audience's experiences, and if interviews face a significant barrier due to the sensitivity of the topic, then how can one study a possibly erotic gaze?

In their famous study from 1989, Clark & Hatfield carried out an experiment where attractive college student confederates asked strangers whether they would date them, come over to their apartment, or go to bed with them. While there was no difference between men and women in their willingness to date, the more openly sexual the offer became, the less women agreed to it. While 75% of men agreed to going into bed with a stranger they just met, all women in their sample rejected casual sex offers. This was subsequently used to support theories that women's finicky in sexual selection is biologically determined and factors other than attractiveness, e.g., status and resources, may be more important for them. However, when Conley set out to revisit this theory (2011), they found that by placing the question in a fantasy scenario, these large gender differences are eliminated. Moreover, when they asked the participants to imagine the proposal of a famous and attractive figure (Johnny Depp for women, Angelina Jolie for men) and a famous and unattractive figure (Donald Trump and comedian Roseanne, respectively), women and men were equally likely to agree to the casual sexual proposal, and women rejected the unattractive candidate just as much as men.[43] In the safety of the fantasy setting, where the imposed risks of aggression or STD where minimized, the significant social constraints surrounding sexuality were also lifted. Thus, I also decided to utilize an imaginary setting for my research on the gaze by choosing fan-written fiction about idols as my data.

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[43] As Conley remarks: "It is indeed difficult to imagine a better person to take care of a woman and her children than someone with the enormous resources of Donald Trump, yet women rejected him soundly. This challenges the assumption that women are driven to choose mates with great resources" (2011, p. 319).

4.2 Research Design

Fanfiction (or fan fiction, sometimes abbreviated as fanfic) is a term[44] referring to "extra-textual stories, written by fans, that focus on the characters or world of an established narrative" (Barnes, 2015, p. 70), e.g., a book, movie, television show, or other media artifact. If a story features a celebrity instead of a fictional character, it can be categorized as RPF (real person fiction or real people fiction). Although many aspects of RPFs are entirely fictional, the characters and the settings featured are based on the public persona of the media performer in real life (Hagen, 2015, p. 45). As fanfiction writing has been theorized as a method of deepening or gaining control of pre-existing parasocial relationships (Van Steenhuyse, 2011; Barnes, 2015), I argue that RPFs are excellent vehicles for exploring how audiences interpret the public image of idols.

Two concepts are of absolute importance here regarding fans' meaning-making processes: canon and fanon. Canon generally refers to the fictional truth presented in the primary texts[45], e.g., events that actually appear in the book(s) or show(s) the story is based upon. In the case of idol RPFs, canon includes original source materials such as interviews, television appearances, social media posts, and audience footage from concerts in addition to the music, lyrics, and the movies and dramas the performers acted in. Fanon, on the other hand, is the ''meta-text'' of the collective fandom imagination (Barnes, 2015), a term used to describe a collection of commonly accepted ideas and traits in fan productions. As Hagen explains: "fanon is a result of the creative process and is more a reflection of the collective desires of the participants than of reality, yet it is often equally important to authors and readers" (Hagen, 2015, p. 46). As familiarity with both the canon and fanon is expected from participants in fan communities, RPFs become most meaningful when analyzed as a larger body of work which incorporates both.

Fanfiction is representative of the imaginative experiences of general audiences as well, i.e., what people enjoy and wonder about while they are immersed in a fictional story, therefore it constitutes a "written record" of a reader's participation in the narrative (Barnes, 2015, p. 72). However, while thinking or daydreaming about a celebrity is a solitary action that is rather difficult to directly access for researchers, fanfiction-writing is a social one: it usually happens in communities and involves written interactions

[44] In Japanese, *dōjinshi* is a similar concept that refers to fan-written, self-published print works, e.g., manga, magazines, or novels.

[45] There are some notable examples of fanfiction writers rejecting authorial declarations, e.g. many Harry Potter fans do not consider Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, a 2016 two-part play, canon—despite the fact that author J.K. Rowling has identified it as such.

between fans. One consensus among fanfiction researchers is that fanfic writers are predominantly female (e.g., Bacon-Smith, 1992, pp. 3–4; Jenkins, 1992, pp. 6–7, Barnes, 2015, p. 74), which makes this community a prolific ground for studying women's gaze and spectatorship. As Galbraith noted about the creators of *yaoi*[46] fanfiction and art: "fans are highlighting precisely what it is about the character, design, scene, interaction, or series that excites, and do this with the intention of sharing that affection. *Yaoi* has been called 'pornography' and 'masturbation fantasy,' but its pleasures are nevertheless meant to be shared" (Galbraith, 2015, p. 157; italicization by me). This collective consciousness has been also described as "sharing one big brain" by one of the participants (Galbraith, 2015, p. 159), and fanfiction offers a window into this hive-mind.

Choosing fanfiction as the subject of analysis offers several advantages from a methodological standpoint. Firstly, while the multi-media omnipresence of idols complicates conducting a comprehensive analysis of their portrayal in media due to the sheer volume of sites and texts, RPFs gather and organize the publicly available data about these performers in one place. Moreover, the image appearing in these texts is already "pre-digested" by the audience, as it represents their readings of the source text, where they explore precisely what entices them about the idol. Furthermore, these communities serve as safe spaces: not only is anonymity guaranteed, these sites are specifically designated to freely sharing fantasies with like-minded, supportive peers, so the social constraints are minimized.

It needs to be acknowledged here that this study was inevitably affected by its author's own position. Since I rely on textual analysis, I am keenly aware that my own meaning-making process is influenced by my social identity, cultural context, and possible biases as a non-Japanese researcher. Thus, I wish to underline that I do not intend to represent the feelings and thoughts of Japanese women as a whole or to essentialize Japanese Arashi fans as a monolithic group. It is impossible to render an absolute interpretation of fans' inner desires or preferences, my objective is therefore to merely offer some admittedly partial, situated truths about the wide variety of possible gazes.

While this approach naturally presents its own set of limitations, as it is essentially "a reading of readings," I agree with Morley's remark that it still "remains a fundamentally

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[46] *Yaoi* is a form of *dōjinshi* and fanfiction, which depicts homoerotic relationships between (usually heterosexual) male characters from popular media, public figures or media personalities. This genre is distinct from homoerotic content marketed to gay men, as it is typically created by women for women. *Yaoi* fandom is predominantly female, just like fanfiction writers and the fans of male idols, and fans often identify as *fujoshi* (rotten girls). These communities can and do overlap, e.g. Glasspool (2012) explored the Arashi *dōjinshi* fandom in their essay.

more appropriate way to attempt to understand what audiences do when they watch television than for the analyst to simply stay home and imagine the possible implications of how other people might watch television" (1989, p. 24), which is how psychoanalysis-based textual analyses of media texts operate.

4.3 Data

There are countless Japanese online fan communities dedicated to creating and sharing fanfiction about idols. I decided to focus on RPFs posted on *Uranai Tsukūru* (http://uranai.nosv.org/), a website that provides a platform for *yume shōsetsu*s ("dream novels"). In a dream novel, the reader has the opportunity to insert their own name into the text as the protagonist, which facilitates self-insertion[47], and thus the reader is positioned as the heroine interacting with the idol. I used "Arashi *yume shōsetsu*" (嵐夢小説) as a key word, and added the following filters: 1) I set the type of data to *shōsetsu* (novel); 2) I excluded unfinished stories; 3) I chose *ren'ai* as a genre (a more sensual category than romantic comedy, which was also an option); 4) and I listed the stories in declining order of popularity. (A screenshot of these parameters and the front page of the search results is included as Appendix A.)

Table 1

Data set (Retrieved 2018, April 2)

	Title ***Romanized (if needed), original, and translation in English***	**Author** ***Romanized (if needed) and original***	**Number of chapters**	**Main Love Interest**
1.	Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto 黄色恋愛マニフェスト (Yellow Love Manifesto)	miichigo ミイチゴ	274	Ninomiya Kazunari
2.	Otona no Koi no Hajimekata【S】 オトナの恋の始め方【S】 (The Beginning of an Adult Love【S】)	sawa さわ	125	Sakurai Shō
3.	Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru	miichigo	251	Ninomiya Kazunari

[47] Some of these stories could be characterized as what fans (derogatorily) refer to as "Mary Sue" stories, where an original female character is depicted as unrealistically flawless (Jenkins, 1992, p. 176; Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 312), which indicates that it is an author's idealized self-insertion. (Original in this context means that the character is developed by the author, and is not part of the canon.)

	黄色純情サーリアル (Yellow Pure Heart Surreality)	ミイチゴ		
4.	Ren'ai Taishōgai【0125BD】 恋愛対象外【0125BD】 (Not a Love Target【0125BD】)	deijī でいじぃ	35	Sakurai Shō
5.	Masquerade【YELLOW】	deijī でいじぃ	44	Ninomiya Kazunari
6.	DEEP LOVE【S.S】	sawa さわ	126	Sakurai Shō
7.	Akairo Meikyū Marijji 赤色迷宮マリッジ (Red Maze Marriage)	miichigo ミイチゴ	158	Sakurai Shō
8.	Tatoe Unmei no Hito Janakute mo【nino】 たとえ運命の人じゃなくても【nino】 (Even If We Are Not Destined to Be 【nino】)	nijimasu にじます	32	Ninomiya Kazunari
9.	Tengoku wa, Otonari 天国は、お隣 (Heaven Is Next to You)	tsumu (つむ), deijī (でいじぃ), Minty, yoshino (よしの), rei	50	All members
10.	Gimmick Love game【N】	sawa さわ	65	Ninomiya Kazunari

A search with these parameters resulted in hundreds and hundreds of hits (currently this number exceeds 2500 titles). I included the stories featured on the front page in my analysis, which limited my sample size to ten (see Table 1)—however, these ten stories actually correspond to 31 titles, because many are so lengthy that they were divided into several parts. I originally conducted this search on 2018, April 2, so my sample reflects the front page on that day, but notably, the majority of this list remained in leading positions since. Eight of the stories featured in my sample are still in the top ten three years later, and only two titles were ousted from the front page: *Tengoku wa, Otonari* is now ranked on the 11th place, and *Gimmick Love Game* is now 15th.

This top list of dream novels was curated based on the reviews of thousands of readers. *Gimmick Love Game* on the very bottom of the list at the time of data collection still had a 9.9 rating based on 1514 votes, with 3092 registered users saving it on their reading

list.[48] The final part of *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*—which is the all-time most popular Arashi dream novel in its category up to this date—was opened close to a million times (certain chapters even exceeding this), had a 9.9 rating with 2611 votes, and was bookmarked by 2344 users. This suggests that these stories are representative of what the community finds enjoyable and compliant with their ideals.

The sheer volume of data was immense: the text used for the analysis exceeded a cumulated total of 850 000 characters. However, as it is indicated on Table 1., the stories varied greatly in length. *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto* was the longest on this list with over 200 000 characters and 274 chapters (divided into seven parts), while the shortest, *Tatoe Unmei no Hito Janakute mo*, consisted of 32 chapters and only one tenth of the character count of the former.

There was a lot less variation in the preferred love interest: five stories focused on Ninomiya, four on Sakurai. *Tengoku wa, Otonari* was a collaborative project of five writers where each of them wrote a shorter story with a different Arashi member as the main character, taking place in the same fictional universe where the characters knew each other. In all other cases, the titles included cues that indicated the love interest of the story. Some referenced the (nick)name or initials of the idols, some used their "color code" (red is associated with Sakurai, yellow with Ninomiya). *Gimmick Love Game* is a hint at Ninomiya's solo song (titled Gimmick Game) on Arashi's 2008 *Dream "A"live* album, and the "0125BD" in the title of *Ren'ai Taishōgai* is a reference to Sakurai's birthday on January 25th. Based on these cues, a fan's trained eye can instantly tell who the story's love interest is, which demonstrates the importance of being acquainted with the canon and fanon as a researcher. It is also a testament to the complexities involved in assessing fans' meaning-making processes, where without knowing the context, certain meanings may be "lost in translation."

Notably, most stories featured multiple members of Arashi, sometimes merely as deuteragonists[49], but often as secondary love interests. For instance, in *Akairo Meikyū Marijji*, the main male lead is Sakurai, but Ninomiya (who is the colleague of the protagonist in the story) is also in love with the heroine. In *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*, Ninomiya is the primary love interest, but Sakurai is also portrayed as a potential suitor. In *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, Ninomiya wins the heroine's heart again, but Sakurai and Ohno are

[48] Registered users can add a bookmark to stories they like, this way they are notified when new chapters are updated.

[49] A deuteragonist is a type of character role where a secondary character is close to the protagonist, but their own character arc does not directly correspond with the story's main plot, e.g., Samwise Gamgee in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, or Mercutio and Benvolio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

both keen contenders. What is particularly interesting about this is that the three stories mentioned here as examples were written by the same author. In fact, if the scope is limited to works that were penned by the same writer—so the eight stories published by miichigo, sawa, or deijī—we can see that all three authors have written stories both about Ninomiya and Sakurai. I argue that this indicates that fans can perceive several Arashi members as potential love objects simultaneously: one heroine's soulmate is another's runner-up, even if they are the products of the same person's fantasy. This suggests that even at the individual level, multiple gazes and flexible positions are possible.

It has to be duly noted that although the works of eight authors are featured in the analysis, certain writers (the aforementioned miichigo, sawa, and deijī) are overrepresented in the sample. Even though the ranking of these stories is based on the readers' evaluation, it is still a valid remark that the works of a handful authors are taken here as representatives of a group, and their personal preferences may shape the findings of this study. It also needs to be acknowledged that not all writers are equal. All authors featured on the front page of the most popular Arashi dream novels are prolific writers with a large following (all hold top star status[50] on the website, and rei, yoshino, and miichigo have even reached superstar status), which means that whatever they publish will reach a wider audience than a newcomer's first story. Indeed, even if the data set would be expanded to include the first ten pages of the most popular stories, we would still mostly spot the same names. The number of followers is reliant on several factors: talent is certainly one, but it may be affected by how many stories a writer has published before and how frequently they update. The front page thus does not necessarily indicate the best stories or the ones most compliant with the audience's taste—it nonetheless represents the most seen texts that thousands of readers greatly approved of. The purpose of limiting my sample to these dream novels is thus not to select based on "quality," or to argue that these texts are most representative of fans in general. It is merely a way to ensure that the texts chosen are canon- and fanon-compliant (otherwise they would not have received such high rankings from thousands of readers), and to choose texts with a significant impact on the community due to their enhanced visibility.

I wish to strongly underline that the point here is not to psychoanalyze individual writers through their works by any means. Following in the footsteps of Roland Barthes, I consider the Author to be dead, and interpret these fanfictions as texts that are of interest

[50] The platform marks a writer's current status with different colored stars on their profiles. An author is considered a top star if more than 3000 people follow their profile. Superstars are the top ten writers in the overall ranking (Uranai Tsukūru, n. d.).

solely because they resonate with a significant part of the community. My focus is on the shared patterns of popular RPFs, not on the people who wrote them, and my objective is to uncover how idols are portrayed in these texts and what aspects of their images are presented as particularly pleasurable for their female fans.

Before moving on to the analysis of the stories, I also wish to first address certain ethical aspects of studying online fandom that needed to be considered in the research design. I only include texts that were made publicly available, published under pseudonyms in my analysis. Since *Uranai Tsukūru* does not require an account to grant access to these stories, and they are also detectable through search engines, I think that it is reasonable to consider this platform a public online space. As dream novels are fictional texts, they have no direct indication of their authors' private lives, unlike blog or social media posts, hence I hope that the potential harm to the writers or the actual people in this community is minimized.

I use the authors' unredacted and unaltered pseudonyms and I cite the sources of my quotes[51], agreeing with Busse's point that "not naming the fan of a text they authored may devalue the work and the person in ways that can be as unethical as exposing them and their community can be" (2018, p. 11-12). However, keeping in line with Busse and Hellekson's recommendation (2012, p. 45), I avoided including the direct URL to the stories in the reference list. This way, retracing the original works is still possible for those who are interested, but they must perform a search first. The introduction of this middle step of inconvenience is useful because it effectively reduces direct traffic to the novels and thus further protects the writer's privacy.

4.4 Analysis

Since this study's primary data consists of stories, initially, narrative analysis seemed the most plausible method for inquiry. As I found many of Janice A. Radway's insights about women and romance reading particularly useful for my research, I was excited to test the applicability of their model of the narrative structure in ideal romances[52] (1991) to my data set. To my disappointment, however, fanfictions do not lend favorably to this approach—or to other well-known theories of a universal dramatic structure, such as

[51] For clarity reasons, I reference the story titles and not the author's name, since multiple writers published more than one story.

[52] Radway argues that successful heterosexual romances follow a similar arc that consists of 13 steps: the first event is the destruction of the heroine's social identity, which gets restored in the final step (1991, p. 134).

Freytag's pyramid, or any other templates commonly utilized in creative writing that I am aware of.

There may be several explanations for this difference. First, fanfictions are amateur publications and they do not go through a professional, institutional editorial process. Second, Radway's book, *Reading the Romance*, was published forty years ago, and it focused on American popular romance which has different conventions (Shibamoto Smith, 2004). Third, since RPF authors presume that their readers already know the celebrity, they can draw on the emotional bond and the information pool that already exists in the reader's imagination, which impacts the author's approach to world and character building. However, I believe that the most decisive factor here stems from the nature of fanfiction.

While both traditional romance novels and fanfictions dwell upon the characters and their inner worlds in a story, this tendency is a lot more pronounced in the latter—to the point where it could be characterized as a preoccupation. As Jones (2002) remarked: "[w]hat is of primary importance to fans is not how characters move along a narrative, but rather what narrative events can reveal about characters" (p. 86), or, as Barnes (2015) put it, fanfiction "need not always concern itself with the demands of story structure and plot" (pp. 76–77). Fanfiction has been characterized as "a chance to get inside a character's head" (Lee, 2011, p. 257) and its penchant for emotional intensification has also been noted by scholars (e.g. Jenkins, 1992, p. 178).

This tendency is also reflected in the genre terminology. Unlike traditional romance novels, which are categorized by their narrative elements, settings, or target audience (e.g., historical, paranormal, new adult, etc.), the characterization of fanfiction is often based on the emotional experience it delivers. So-called fluff stories are "warm and fuzzy" romances (Van Steenhuyse, 2011, p. 7), while hurt/comfort stories are defined by the protagonist undergoing painful transitions, illnesses, trauma, or torture, and subsequently being comforted by another character (Jenkins, 1992, p. 178; Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 310). The romantic dream novels on *Uranai Tsukūru* were not divided into any subcategories by their authors, nonetheless, they conformed more to the emotion-driven fanfiction categories than their traditional romance counterparts. For instance, *DEEP LOVE* was consistent with the characterization of a hurt/comfort story: its protagonist suffered so much from her lovers' infidelity that she developed ataxia, which required medical treatment. However, at the end, the conflicts between the lovers were resolved, and she was comforted for all the pain she had to endure. On the other hand, it was evident from the very first chapter of *Akairo Meikyū Marijji* that the story is going to be full of

fluff and light-hearted entertainment: it started out with two strangers marrying each other in order to fulfil their (respective) grandfathers' will, and the groom (none other than Sakurai Shō himself) jokingly likened the heroine to an octopus at the altar.

Since fanfictions are more about characters and emotional experience rather than plot, narrative analysis was not an ideal fit for my data. Considering that my interest is on locating fans' shared perceptions of idols, I found thematic analysis a lot more appropriate for my research purposes. Thematic analysis is a method specifically designed to identify, analyze, and report patterns (Braun & Clarke 2006), thus I found it particularly fitting for both my research question and my primary data.

My research concerns online sources that can be deleted or modified at any time, I hence started the analysis with carefully archiving my data set. First, I saved the stories as an HTML document chapter by chapter (a process which took days), but it enabled me to essentially create an accurate, verifiable archive of not only the texts themselves, but the various statistics (e.g., date of upload, the number of readers up to that point, bookmarks, etc.) of the stories and the visual elements of the page that could be accessed later. Then I manually copied the texts into a word processor, excluding any unnecessary data (e.g., hyperlinks used for navigation), unified formatting, and made the documents as compact and printer friendly[53] as possible.

Following the guidelines for thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), my analysis consisted of six steps: familiarization with the data; generating initial codes; searching for, reviewing, and defining themes; and producing the report. My initial coding scheme was done manually, and its aim was simply cataloguing the information available before even attempting its interpretation. I thus divided my codes into three practical categories: plot-related elements (subcategories including, e.g., turning points and important events in the narrative), settings and locations (e.g., the descriptions of the love interest's apartment or belongings), and characters (e.g., age and occupation of the protagonists and love interests, descriptions of their inner and outer characteristics, side character appearances). As I grew more familiar with my data set and my coding scheme became more refined, I moved beyond the semantic level of the texts to assess the latent level of broader meanings and implications, including the shared patterns of how idol images and masculinities were portrayed in these stories.

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[53] Using an extensive amount of line breaks seems to constitute a part of the visual grammar of dream novels, often used to mark emphasis or pacing. Automatically converting the paragraph marks into hashtag symbols before printing saved *a lot* of space and paper and made the text a lot more concise without losing any of the functionality of these line breaks.

The discussion of the findings is structured along four central themes. First, themes related to the narratives will be introduced, such as the setting of stories and their endings, and I will explore what function fame serves in these stories. In the second chapter, the inherent flexibility of the celebrity image will be analyzed, in relation to its potential to invite fantasy. Next, the discussion will focus on the construction of the idol masculinity, situated in the ongoing discourses on the "masculinity crisis" in Japan. Finally, I will investigate how work and dreams were presented in the dream novels, and what these texts reveal about femininity in contemporary Japanese society.

4.5 Themes

4.5.1 Plot Patterns and the Romance of Fame

The data set could be divided into two main categories based on settings: canonical or "real-setting" (*riaru settei*) stories, where the main love interest is an idol by profession (with six novels in the group), and so-called AU (alternate or alternative universe) stories, which take place in a fictional universe where the love interests are not celebrities (which includes four novels).

The starting points of the stories varied: in some cases, the inciting incident was the heroine meeting the idol for the first time, but in some cases, they already knew each other (in *Ren'ai Taishōgai*, *Masquerade*, *Tatoe Unmei no Hito Janakute mo*, and *Gimmick Love Game*). What they all shared was their endings—the hero's demonstration of his unwavering, monogamous commitment at varying levels. Three stories ended with a promise to start dating officially, one with the characters moving in together, four with a proposal or a wedding, and in *Akairo Meikyū Marijji*, where getting married was the inciting incident, the story's climax was the couple having a baby. All the novels in my sample, even the melancholic ones, finished with a happy end.

The stories themselves varied greatly, but most of them conformed to typical fanfiction tropes[54], such as the Bed Sharing/"There Is Only One Bed" trope (*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*), Arranged Marriage (*Akairo Meikyū Marijji*), Class Reunion (*Ren'ai Taishōgai*), Exotic Vacation (*Otona no Koi no Hajimekata*), or Friends-To-Lovers (*Tatoe Unmei no Hito Janakute mo*). All these are common themes in fanfiction which are not specific to idol RPFs, and they mostly operate as wish-fulfillment devices, since they lead

[54] Tropes are common plot devices in fanfiction.

to situations that the reader secretly enjoys. However, there was one trope that served a different function, which I labeled as the "Domesticating the Womanizer" trope.

In two "real setting" stories (*DEEP LOVE* and *Gimmick Love Game*), the heroine and the love interest have a strictly physical, open relationship, but the protagonist is secretly in love with the idol and her feelings are hurt by the signs of his infidelities. In these dream novels, the general tone is rather dark, and being cheated on hurts these women deeply. Then why do readers immerse themselves in a fantasy which is so unpleasant? As Radway (1991, pp. 141–142) points out, not all fantasies are about wish-fulfillment, some originate from anxiety and fear. They argue that a story can function as a coping mechanism where, in the safe environment of the reader's fantasy, they can project a happy outcome to an event that they have reason to fear. They write: "[i]n effect, through her imagination she controls an occurrence that is widespread in her culture which she can neither predict nor prevent" (p. 141). I argue that these gloomy stories about a partner's infidelity are best understood through this approach, and that this trope is directly correlated to the idol's status as a celebrity.

All the "real-setting" stories operated on the presumption that idols are extremely popular with women, which makes being their girlfriends simultaneously an accomplishment and a hazard. It is notable that the idols remained desirable love objects nonetheless, as their behavior was always redeemed: in *DEEP LOVE*, Sakurai had his heart broken previously by another woman which led to his trust issues, in *Gimmick Love Game*, Ninomiya was framed. They were portrayed as brooding "good guys" who, behind their cold exterior, were suffering just as much as the heroine due to their loneliness, waiting for the right woman and true love to fix them. Both stories end with the idol confessing his love, apologizing for the error of his ways, and begging the protagonist to start anew in a faithful, monogamous relationship (in *DEEP LOVE*, Sakurai even proposes). The breach of trust is thus rectified, the heroine is no longer insecure, and they live happily ever after.

In the rest of the stories, the love interest's monogamous commitment was impeccable. However, in every "real setting" novel, the idol's celebrity status was a source of constant threat to the relationship and the implicit or explicit cause of the relationship crisis. Some conflicts were caused by internal struggles, when the heroine was doubting whether she was good enough, considering that the idol lived in "another world" and was surrounded by beautiful women. The biggest external threat was publicity. The heroines were frequently lamenting about the damage that the potential exposure of their relationship would cause: "As I exit the elevator, I have to stop my tears until I leave this building

behind, since I don't know who might be watching. It would be him who is hurt by the dirty gossip, after all. I cannot inconvenience him under any circumstances" [55] (*Masquerade*, Chapter 3). Or as the protagonist of *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru* contemplates: "Ninomiya having a lover would break the hearts of a million people"[56] (Chapter 80).

This is a legitimate concern—as it was mentioned in Chapter 2.2, agencies keenly try to prevent dating scandals. Allegedly, when a Johnny's idol informs the agency of their intention of marrying someone, their manager will show them statistics of the potential damage it would cause to their popularity which is often enough to deter them (Hernon, 2016). As it is also evident from the second quote, the purpose of keeping an idol's relationship status secret is to protect the romantic feelings of fans, since part of the idol's charm is their availability. Yet concurrently, the dating ban seems to entice the fans as well: the risk of being found out creates the kind of tension that dream novels thrive on. Of course, being a public figure is only one aspect of an idol's image, and as it is demonstrated by the four AU novels in my sample where the love interest is not a celebrity, their charisma extends beyond their well-knownness. Nonetheless, I argue that fame itself is part of the idols' appeal.

4.5.2 And Which Ninomiya Are You Writing About? —The Ambiguity of Celebrity

Perhaps the most striking thing about RPFs as a genre is that they are a testimony to the inherent flexibility of the celebrity image. The same Ninomiya Kazunari who "sings and dances" by profession is reimagined as a CEO of a media company (*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*), as a chemistry teacher (*Akairo Meikyū Marijji*), or as the owner of an erotic shop (*Tengoku wa, Otonari*) with astonishing ease. Writers even name the different versions of Ninomiyas with labels such as "Gesu-miya," "Ria-miya," "Sawa-miya," "Chara-miya," "Platinum Data-miya"[57], just in a sample of ten novels. How is this possible? How can one person embody so many different versions of themselves, yet still remain recognizable?

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[55] Original text: "エレベーターを降りて、このマンションを出るまでには、泣き止まなきゃならない。・・・・・・どこで、誰が見てるかなんてわからないから。あらぬ噂を立てられて困るのは・・・彼だから。彼に迷惑なんて、掛けられない。" ("Erebētā o orite, kono manshon o deru made ni wa, nakitomanakya naranai. ...Doko de, dare ga miteru ka nante wakaranai kara. Aranu uwasa o taterarete komaru no wa... kare dakara. Kare ni meiwaku nante, kakerarenai."; line breaks omitted)

[56] Original text: "二宮さんに恋人がいたら| 100 万人が失恋するってことだよね。" ("Ninomiya-san ni koibito itara | hyakuman'nin ga shitsuren surutte koto da yo ne.")

[57] Platinum Data is the name of a movie Ninomiya starred in, the rest of the terms refer to either an inner quality or the writer's name.

In order to understand how this chameleon-like fluidity functions, the construction of celebrity as texts needs to be addressed. I identified cross-media omnipresence as one of the defining characteristics of idols in Chapter 2.2, which has been also conceptualized as their "intertextuality" (e.g., Darling-Wolf, 2000 and 2004a; Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). Intertextuality refers to the idea that a text's meaning is intrinsically shaped by others, thus all texts are mosaics of quotations to other texts. While it was originally understood as a literary device, it is very commonly used in relation to other cultural products, media texts, convergence culture, and stars. Since the "total star text" (Dyer, 1991a, p. 136) is read across all of the celebrity's different media manifestations, star images are "always extensive, multimedia, intertextual" (Dyer, 1987, p. 3). Thus, idols could be also conceptualized as what Jenkins calls transmedia stories: a narrative that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95–96). The same phenomenon has been theorized in Japan as well as "media mix" (Steinberg, 2010, p. 100).

This inevitably complicates the meaning-making processes of the audience. As Jenkins notes, consumers must become "informational hunters and gatherers," reveling in tracking down shards of a story's, or a character's, background for a richer entertainment experience (Jenkins, 2006, p. 21.). This is a similar concept to Ōtsuka Eiji's narrative consumption theory (Ōtsuka, 2010), where the driving force for consumption is the wish to collect the pieces of a grand narrative. It also parallels Saitō's observations on how *otaku* take pleasure in "straddling" the multiple imaginary levels of the layered contexts of manga and anime, which include not only the texts themselves, but information about its author and the marketing as well (Saitō, 2010, p. 227). Catching a reference is a source of pleasure for the fan, and idol performances consciously draw on this. As Darling-Wolf (2004a) explains, SMAP concerts are so deeply embedded in the intertextual web of in-jokes that "[t]o outside observers, the concerts simply do not make sense" (p. 366).

However, there is a major difference between fictional characters and idols, as the latter incorporate one more, vital layer: their private selves. DeCordova argues (1991) that what distinguished the star from the picture personality was that their private background became part of the discourse, a valorized site of knowledge, the star is thus characterized "by a fairly throughgoing articulation of the paradigm professional life/private life" (p. 26). These two constitute autonomous spheres that support and build upon each other. As it was discussed in Chapter 3.5.1, the idols' existence outside of media texts establishes their authenticity. Moreover, the knowledge that there is a real

person out there embodying all these different roles and contexts lends coherence and unity to the—often contradictory—images constructed by the media (Dyer, 1987, p. 10).

It also serves another function: it entices the audiences. Lam argues that it is precisely the unknown, "behind the scenes" aspect of the private persona that invites speculation and fantasy (2014, p. 7), and the same was noted by Hagen (2015). RPFs are exciting because they offer a peek behind the curtains to get closer to the private persona, the "real" idol that the fan wonders about. As Dyer explains about the construction of stars: "The basic paradigm is just this—that what is behind or below the surface is, unquestionably and virtually by definition, the truth" (Dyer, 1991a, p. 136). It is the "true self" of the idol that people are seeking but what they can never quite reach, since each attempt to access it just adds another layer to the mix. I thus argue that in the case of idols, the "grand narrative" that fans are trying to collect piece by piece, media appearance by media appearance, is their authentic selves.

In consistency with this, the dream novels in my sample employ a variety of strategies to manufacture authenticity. Detailed narrations of facial expressions were remarkably frequent, often indicative of the love interest's unmediated, true emotions. Reading from the eyes was particularly prevalent. Descriptions like "I can tell from the wavering eyes that look up to me that he feels the same insecurity that I do"[58] (*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, Chapter 127) or "this was the first time he looked at me like that... in his eyes, there is nothing but my own reflection"[59] (*Ren'ai Taishōgai*, Chapter 29) were common in every story. A heightened focus on the idol's tone of voice, posture, mannerisms also was typical of the dream novel's narrative style. Passionate outbursts of emotions and the detailed portrayal of unguarded moments (e.g. the sleeping character's face) were also frequent. All these fall in line with what Jandl (2017) identifies as the bodily signs of authenticity in visual media.

Great efforts went into establishing the authenticity of the settings and details as well. One outstanding example of this was *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*, where author miichigo carefully synchronized her updates with corresponding real-life events, e.g., album release dates and television appearances that were featured in the story as well.[60] Since the novel also included detailed descriptions of Arashi's ongoing *Japonism* concert tour,

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[58] Original text: "私を見上げるその瞳は | ユラユラ揺れて同じく不安定なのが分かる。" ("Watashi o miageru sono hitomi wa | yurayura furete onajiku fuantei nano ga wakaru.")

[59] Original text: "初めて私に見せてくれたその瞳には・・・今、私しか映っていない。" ("Hajimete watashi ni misete kureta sono hitomi ni wa... ima, watashi shika utsutte inai.")

[60] This is explained at the end of the novel in a chapter titled *Urabana 2*.

the writer issued a warning after Chapter 106 to notify the readers who wanted to avoid spoilers in advance. Real locations and real events are often featured in these stories, in addition to Arashi fan trivia, explicit and implicit insertion of song lyrics, and *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto* even included a recipe in Chapter 44—hence it seems that these dream novels represent a rich web of meanings which is as intertextual as the idols they are about. Through the incorporation of these outer reference points into the fantasy domain, these novels anchor the "dreams" they represent into reality. This echoes Busse's notion that the RPF "functions in the constant paradox of being simultaneously real and constructed, of reveling in its own constructedness at the same time as it purports a clear connection to reality" (2006, p. 216).

While fans clearly enjoy participating in this celebrity game which provides them with plenty of space for creative interpretations, this flexibility is not limitless. Canon and fanon reside on a collective agreement of what a character's "core traits" are, and this remains the point of departure for any successful RPF. Fans expect the fictional idol to talk and behave like the idol they feel like they know, and writers have to ultimately adapt a particular set of characteristics to their work (Van Steenhuyse, 2011). Or, as Dyer argued: "[a]udiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them" (1987, p. 5).

Due to Arashi's multi-media presence and their various activities, their fans can choose from an immense library of extremely diverse media images. Indeed, many characteristics presented in the dream novels could be traced back to the members' roles in dramas or their television appearances. In *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, Ohno is the antagonist: a two-faced businessman who ruthlessly manipulates others. This could not be further away from his "usual" persona which is that of a laid-back, quiet person who enjoys fishing—but a fan can instantly associate it with his leading role in *Maō*, a 2008 TBS drama, where he played a strikingly similar character, a revengeful lawyer. In *Akairo Meikyū Marijji*, Matsumoto Jun appears as a female school nurse by the name of Junko, which is, to put it mildly, a significant alteration to his actual image. However, this was probably a reference to a specific episode of one of Arashi's variety shows, *Arashi no Shukudai-kun* (NTV, episode 52), where he was playfully forced into cross-dressing as a nurse called Junko. *Gimmick Love Game*, one of the RPFs that feature the "Domesticate the Womanizer" trope which was mentioned before, has strong connections to canon as well. The title and the story itself are clear references to one of Ninomiya's solo songs,

Gimmick Game, which is about a relationship where one party is painfully aware of their partner's infidelities, and the story covertly copies several lines of the lyrics.

The multi-media presence and intertextuality of idols is theorized as a tactic to strengthen the parasocial bonds with their fans through repeated exposures. However, reading these dream novels made me wonder whether it also serves a separate function besides this, which may explain why idols become actors. While music and television appearances make the audience think that they know the performer, acting opens up new avenues for their imaginations without undermining the authenticity of the idols' private personae. Maybe this explains why the strategic pivot by Johnny's in the 1990s (which was described in Chapter 2.1.4) was so successful: the intense promotion of SMAP through television performances and drama appearances allowed for more flexible and diverse celebrity images which entice the spectator's fantasy. Seeing Arashi members in a variety of roles—from lovers to villains to female nurses—on television plants new seeds of possibilities in their fans' imagination, it widens the canon, and thus it gives them a lot more creative material to play around with. In other words, it makes idol fantasies more exciting.

What is remarkable is that despite this considerable flexibility in their images, the idols in these RPFs not only remain authentic and "true" to the canon, but they are also recognizable. Ninomiya and Sakurai are not interchangeable as love objects, and a fan can identify them already from the way they speak. Since their faces are familiar to the fan, the texts emphasize subtle differences in their gestures and mannerisms, and narrate their movements and reactions differently. For Ninomiya, the novels often mention his childlike hands, for Sakurai, the focus is usually on his sloping shoulders or muscular abdomen. Aiba is energetic and laughs loudly, Matsumoto is decisive and has a keen eye for detail in every story. These subtle inner and outer cues, once again, are easy to dismiss if one is not familiar with the canon and fanon, and this study most certainly only caught a fraction of the intended meanings and in-jokes. Yet this demonstrates how differently the same texts can be read and that the audience's role in meaning-making should not be downplayed.

4.5.3 New Masculinities and a Medusa-Like Stare

Since part of my research question is on the female sexual gaze, investigating how masculinities are constructed in these texts is a key area of interest. The concept of manliness is a contested terrain, one that is prone to trigger some public anxiety and moral panic. As scholars have noted, not only is Japanese masculinity in a constant crisis but it

is essentially a "crisis-bound formation" (Frühstück & Walthall, 2011, p. 4). The threat of men losing their "manliness" has been dreaded already in the eighteenth-century (and interpreted as a sure sign of impending doom[61]), and recently, the discourses are centered on the "death of the salaryman," the latest example of a hegemonic masculinity.

While the salaryman, the figure of a male white-collar bureaucrat, used to epitomize social status and financial security since the 1950s, the burst of the economic bubble and the following recession triggered significant social changes. The crumbling of the lifetime employment system, loss of job security, women's increasing involvement in the workforce led to the revision of conventional gender roles. It became increasingly difficult for Japanese men to find a bride willing to get married, and many young men themselves started to "strategically distance themselves from conventional masculinity" (Iida, 2005, p. 56). Discourses on *otaku*, NEETs, freeters, herbivore men, or *ikumen* often reflect the public concern that "real men" are going extinct—or worse, feminine. (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003; Frühstück & Walthall, 2011; Koch & Steger, 2017)

Male idols are usually brought up in these debates in relation to the emergence of aesthetically conscious men. Aesthetic salons that provide beauty services exclusively for men are becoming more and more popular, and fashion and lifestyle magazines targeted at men often write about women's ideals for male appearance, using SMAP's Kimura Takuya as an example (Miller, 2006). As Tso and Nanase (2017) observe, self-help literature targeted at businessmen offers advice on grooming, including hair and skin care, and it also emphasizes one aspect of inner beauty: better communication and listening skills. It seems that if a man wants to be successful with the other sex, they need to be well-groomed, but also empathetic and attentive. Traits that were traditionally considered feminine thus are increasingly present in the construct of ideal masculinity, and even though both the beauty salons and the self-help books try to avoid any association with femininity at all costs (Miller, 2006, p. 130, Tso & Nanase, 2017, p. 108), this shift is nonetheless the source of quite some moral panic.

However, the phenomenon—and the concern—is not unique to Japan: teen idols in the 1950s and '60s, e.g., Ricky Nelson or The Monkees, were already marketed as young men who are "soft, vulnerable, and caring," "male but not phallically male" (Sweeney,

[61] In *Hagakure: Book of the Samurai*, Yamamoto Tsunetomo observed the worrying tendency that men's pulse started to resemble women's. They further commented: "thus I knew that men's spirit had weakened and that they had become the same as women, and the end of the world had come. […] When looking at the men of today with this in mind, those who could be thought to have a woman's pulse are many indeed, and those who seem like real men few." They also consider the tendency that fewer men cut well in beheadings as further proof of this dangerous trend. (Yamamoto, 1983, p. 24)

1994, p. 51) in the U.S., and similar characteristics have been spotted about the eroticized representations of men in women's crime fiction (Frizzoni, 2009). As Moore has argued already in 1988: "[t]he fear experienced by men of women's Medusa-like stare which petrifies everything in sight, is in reality a fear that the female gaze will soften everything in its path. Yet this softening has already been achieved in many of these new representations of men […]." (p. 59). It is exactly this Medusa-like stare that this chapter is about.

As RPFs are written by women for women, these texts constitute a special category of masculinity that is constructed by females. It is thus fictional and idealized, yet I argue that studying it is nonetheless useful in two regards. Firstly, they are indicative of the social contexts they are embedded in. Following psychoanalytic theory, Galbraith has claimed that the female idol can be conceptualized as "a symptom of a man" (Galbraith, 2012, p. 194), and several other studies on *otaku* have analyzed what their pleasure can tell us about Japanese men and society (e.g., LaMarre, 2004; Condry, 2011). As Dent-Spargo puts it: "she [the female idol] is a mirror for reflecting the desires of men back at them, and a canvas that they can fill in however they please" (p. 219). In a similar vein, it can be argued then that male idols are symptomatic of womanhood. While women's pleasure has been historically often dismissed as mindless escapism (Stacey, 1994, p. 90), fantasy can not only be liberating, but also informative of social realities. As Dyer argues: "[e]ntertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized" (Dyer, 1985, 222). Secondly, as Sweeney (1994) contends, "there must be imagining before there can be action" (p. 51). Both Miller's (2006) and Tso & Nanase's study (2017) demonstrate that female preference can be considered as a potential driving force for change, since what constitutes successful manliness is partly determined by women.

Six stories in my sample featured Ninomiya as the main love interest, and five Sakurai, a fact which had major advantages from an analytical standpoint. First, it narrowed down the focus to mostly two characters rather than five, and therefore it allowed for a more comprehensive reading of the data. Second, comparing these two characters was interesting because Ninomiya and Sakurai represent rather different masculinities. Sakurai has an image that is closer to the conventional notions of ideal masculinity: he graduated from the elite Keiō university, he has a reputable family background (his father is a former government official), and he works as a newscaster. Even his looks align more

with traditional "manliness:" he is taller and has a more muscular build than Ninomiya. Perhaps to spice up this conservative image, Sakurai was anointed to fill in the compulsory rapper position in the band, and used to have a rebellious bellybutton piercing in his younger days, so his image is of course a bit more complex. Yet notably, he wore a suit in every AU story nonetheless, and his alternative profession was either as a businessman (*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto, Ren'ai Taishōgai, Akairo Meikyū Marijji*) or a landlord (*Tengoku wa, Otonari*). The same cannot be said about Ninomiya: in the AU story where he was portrayed as a CEO (*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*), the heroine was shocked when she first saw him wearing a suit (which did not happen very often), and in the other two AU stories he was either a teacher or the owner of an erotic shop. Ninomiya is known for his love for gaming—an element that was heavily emphasized in every story—and he is generally portrayed as a witty, often cunning character that loves to banter. Since he and Sakurai are rather different in many regards, identifying the common denominators in their attributes and attitudes can uncover a lot about what is constitutive of idol masculinity in general.

The first aspect to underline here is that the masculinity of both characters was never questioned—in fact, it was frequently emphasized. The love interests talked like men, identified as men, and the heroines and other women in the story perceived them as such. While androgynous traits were observed—and often admired—the idol's manliness and attractiveness were established very early on. For instance, in *Masquerade*, when the protagonist tells the story of how she first met Ninomiya, she narrates it as follows: "His hands are not bony like most men's. However, he's grasping my wrists with such strength... So he's definitely a man after all, that's what's running through my head"[62] (Chapter 8). The context of this encounter was a *gōkon* (mixer party for singles), where Ninomiya turned up unexpectedly, and he instantly became the target of all the women present, which underpinned his desirability as a love object. He also invited the heroine into his apartment, so the sexual connotations were clear. In *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, Ninomiya's character himself jokes about his slender physique when the protagonist asks whether he carried her to bed in his arms: "Huh? Have you seen my muscles? I have less

[62] Original text: "男の人にしては、骨ばっていないその手。なのに、手首を強い力で掴まれて・・・やっぱり男なんだな、なんて頭のどこかで考えていた。" ("Otoko no hito ni shite wa, honeppatte inai sono te. Nano ni, tekubi o tsuyoi chikara de tsukamarete... Yappari otoko nanda na, nante atama no doko ka de kangaete ita."; line breaks omitted)

muscle than a woman, how could I have carried you in my arms when you weigh a ton?"[63] (Chapter 21). However, the reader knows from the previous chapters that he indeed did. Here, too, the feminine "softness" of his looks is acknowledged, but it is combined with a reaffirmation of his physical strength that is perceived as inherently manly. I thus agree with Miller's (2006) argument that these new male ideals are not indicative of the feminization of men, but rather of a shift where beautification and looks become a component of masculinity. Since beauty standards are social constructs that tend to vary and change rapidly, a *shōnen*-like thinness may be better understood merely as an aesthetic preference, and not as a rejection of masculinity or sexuality as Nagaike (2012) suggests. Regarding the last point, it also needs to be noted that the male leads in these dream novels were explicitly sexualized. The texts did not shy away from detailed descriptions of sex scenes, most of which were in line with what one would expect from the genre. The idols were portrayed as experienced and assertive, yet attentive lovers, which is rather typical in romance fiction.

When it comes to inner characteristics, I suggest that a more appropriate way to frame the idealized masculine behavior is through delineating what it is *not*. Six stories started with either a break-up or simply lamenting the protagonist's past disappointments in love. Since these relationships failed, it can be argued that these ex-partners embody some non-ideal aspects of masculinity. In three cases, the ex-boyfriends were also featured in the story (*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*, *Gimmick Love Game*), and they clearly functioned as a form of foil (a character type that is used as a contrast to another character's qualities). Interestingly, all these ex-boyfriends were working as salarymen and they either cheated on the heroine or were cheating on their partners with the heroine. As for their inner qualities, in *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*, the emphasis was on how the ex-boyfriend was unsupportive of the protagonist (I will discuss this further in the next chapter). In *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, however, the events took a bit more sinister turn. When the protagonist visits the apartment of her ex-boyfriend, Takumi, with the intention to move out, she gets sexually assaulted by him. I will include a bit longer quote of the novel here, because how it is narrated is also informative:

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[63] Original text: "は？ワタシのこの筋肉見てみなさいよ？女子より筋肉無いのにどうやって 1t のお前をお姫様抱っこすんだよ？サスペンス劇場の犯人がアレを引きずるように運んだんだよ。" ("Ha? *Watashi* no kono kin'niku mite minasai yo? Joshi yori kin'niku nai no ni dō yatte 1t no omae o ohimesama dakko sundayo?"; line breaks omitted)

I resist frantically, but as expected, I'm no match for a man's force. In my useless struggle, I loudly pound on the wall, but he is just not stopping at all. I used to love him so much.... but now I try to resist him with all my might.

"No! Stop it! Please!"

"You don't seem to really mean it though..."

"I mean it. Please, stop it for real..."

"That excites me even more," he laughs.

I never expected that something like this could happen, that it may be dangerous to come into a man's house, especially to the house of a man whom I used to date. The extent of my stupidity and my powerlessness as a woman make me cry. And the moment I give up...

Ding-dong... Ding-dong... Ding-dong Ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong!

A storm of non-stop *ding-dong*s.

"What the heck is this! Just when it started to get good..." Takumi loses his patience, and mustering all his remaining self-control, he opens the front door a little.

Clank.

"What is it?"

"Hello, it's Ninonari Express."

(*Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, Chapter 44; line breaks omitted; original text is included in Appendix B)

Ninonari is the heroine's nickname for Ninomiya, who—it is perhaps no surprise—came to rescue her. Two other stories (*Akairo Meikyū Marijji* and *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*) featured some sort of sexual assault (attempted rape in a forest and groping in a convenience store, respectively), and in each case the heroine was saved by an idol: on two occasions by the love interest and once by the secondary love interest Sakurai. These scenes were charged with a deep feeling of helplessness that was resolved by the arrival of the idol, who removed the threat. The quote above also portrays the power dynamics as gendered: a woman's powerlessness (*onna no muryoku*) stands against a man's strength (*dansei no chikara*). Idols here represent a masculinity that is just as powerful as other men's—if not even stronger—since it is able to defuse these situations, but it is non-threatening and in control. I thus argue that rather than interpreting idols as effeminate or non-masculine images, it is perhaps more sensible to reconceptualize them as

representatives of a new kind of manliness: it is not masculinity per se that is getting omitted, only its dominant, threatening aspects.

A second concept here to elaborate on is control. I use this word here to refer not to the control of others, but to the control of the self. While love interests in these dream novels were assertive and usually the ones who instigated physical intimacy, *gaman* (self-restraint or perseverance) was a reoccurring keyword in these novels, usually in the context of a love interest needing to hold back and resist his instincts, either because the heroine did not know his feelings, or because she was too sick or too drunk to consent (e.g., *DEEP LOVE, Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*). I think this may mark a shifting tendency in women's romance in general, but it also indicates that the ideal man is one that is confidently in control of himself. Not only does *gaman* create tension in the stories, it also reinforces the attractiveness of the heroine whom the readers identify with. Furthermore, this inner discipline is also something that distinguishes the ideal man from the sexual predators, and thus makes them less threatening.

Another aspect of this new masculinity is the lack of insecurity and a willingness to embrace vulnerability. Generally speaking, public figures and entertainers are expected to be confident on stage. However, for Arashi and television personalities in general, this is no small feat, considering that Japanese television thrives on embarrassing situations. Arashi learnt early on how to "read the atmosphere" and provide comic relief, often at their own expense. Their variety shows regularly feature special editions with punishment games (*batsu gēmu*), cosplaying and occasionally cross-dressing, and they have a long history of willingly humiliating themselves in public, which is basically the backbone of their early variety shows. Not only do they make their audience laugh at them, but they manage to do it with confidence, without ever getting insecure.

This (sometimes self-deprecating) humor was definitely present in my sample, e.g., Ninomiya making fun of his lack of muscles that I mentioned above, and many of these novels thrived on comical dialogues and witty banters. Both Ninomiya and Sakurai were depicted having a strong sense of humor and a quick wit when it came to conversations, which is contrariety to the serious demeanor of the salaryman image, thus, it constitutes another site of softening. Humor is definitely part of Arashi's public image as well that is evident in, for instance, their own album covers (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Arashi CD covers.

Note. *On the left:* Popcorn (2012, album*). On the right:* Love so Sweet (2007, single).

On the left, they are dressed up as human popcorn, but they look into the camera with a completely straight face. On the right, they have a similarly serious expression, while the image itself pokes fun at cars, a visual trope associated with manliness and male musicians. Both images are illustrative of why Darling-Wolf has characterized Johnny's idols as the antithesis of a salaryman (2004a, p. 367): they represent a new kind of masculinity, one with a playful twist.

4.5.4 "Arashi for Dream"—Neoliberal Sensibilities

While the dream novel fit surprisingly well into the theoretical framework of fanfiction in regards of plot, tropes, and its character- and emotion-centeredness, there was one distinct cultural characteristic: these Japanese RPFs had an enhanced emphasis on the heroine's career. The dream novels in my sample in fact paralleled many of the talking points of what Lukács defines as workplace drama (Lukács, 2010), a genre of primetime television drama where the plot is placed in the context of one's workplace, often in offices.

The workplace drama became popular in the second half of the 1990s, which coincides with the recession and women's increased participation in the labor market, as many had to keep working after marriage. As Lukács explains: "marriage to a prince charming who would provide for his sweetheart for the rest of her life […] was no longer a *desirable* route for the minority of women who wanted to pursue careers, and it was no longer a *viable* route for the majority of women" (Lukács, 2010, p. 157). In the new socioeconomic order, work itself became more exploitable and less and less meaningful for many, yet

the new neoliberal rhetoric outsourced responsibility to the individual, suggesting that there was no unrewarding job, only a bad attitude. Lukács argues that workplace dramas epitomize an ideological effort to reintroduce values like individualism, fun, and autonomy into the world of wage labor, and thus "workplace dramas offered labor fantasies that served to make neoliberal initiatives for individual responsibilization more palatable" (Lukács, 2010, p. 174). These shows mobilized people into a new model of rationality by associating labor with keywords such as lifestyle, individual potential, and personal responsibility.

In line with this, work was presented as an important site of self-actualization and identity for the heroines in my sample. The protagonists had full-time jobs in each novel, and their professional life was also a focal point in the majority of the stories, which is rather unusual for fanfiction. Moreover, the ideal love objects not only shared this high work morale, but also were identified by their strong support for the heroine's career.

In *Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto*, the protagonist works at a company that makes commercials. When she finds out that her boyfriend, who is also her boss, cheated on her, he asks her to quit her job. However, even though she is heart-broken about their break-up, she firmly refuses saying: "I can give you up, but I can't give up work"[64] (Chapter 30). The ex-boyfriend here functions as a literary foil for Ninomiya, the love interest, who on the contrary knows how much she loves her job and fully supports her. A similar contrast is used in *Akairo Meikyū Marijji*, where Sakurai's character argues that supporting the protagonist's career is the ultimate proof of true love:

> You [the secondary love interest] are saying you're going protect her, but that's just your own complacency. What would you do if things got serious and she [the heroine] was forced to quit her position at the school because of you? If she lost her job as a teacher, which is so important to her? If your "protection" ended up hurting her? [...] For me, love means protecting the things that are important to her. (Chapter 110; line breaks omitted; original text is included in Appendix B)

In *Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*, the protagonist worked as an on-board service employee on bullet trains during the day, but she wanted to become a full-time model. Her boyfriend did not encourage her at all, and she almost gave up her dream, but after their break-up she met Ninomiya, who cheered her on full-heartedly. The ex-boyfriend functions here

[64] Original text: "私…あなたの事は譲りますけど | 仕事のことは譲れませんから。" ("Anata no koto wa yuzurimasu kedo | shigoto no koto wa yuzuremasen kara.")

as an explicit foil, and the heroine's success is directly attributed to having a new, supportive background (e.g. Chapter 141). Fulfilling dreams (which are equated with career goals) is a central topic in the story:

> The promise we exchanged with Kazu means a lot more to him than I thought. I knew he was encouraging me, but I didn't realize the true extent of it. Kazu really believes in me that much. More than I do.
> [Ninomiya says:]
> "There is nothing else I can do for you than to believe in your potential. It may be a careless thing to say, but let me see this dream come true. Before I even realized, your dream became mine." (*Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru*, Chapter 207; line breaks omitted; original text is included in Appendix B)

The idols shared this high work morale, which is perhaps not surprising considering that working hard is a cardinal point of their image. The word *yume* (dream) is featured in almost every Arashi lyrics, including their debut song, in which "Arashi for dream" is a reoccurring, central catchline. Since their occupation as idols is portrayed as the most important sphere of their life and their identity in the media, the biggest dream they chase appears to be their profession, and working hard at their fictional jobs, whatever that may be, is also a major theme in the dramas they star in. This message seems to resonate with their fans based on these novels.

In the neoliberal ideology, "work became the very force field within which individuals could enact their freedom," Lukács (2010, 174) argues, and romantic relationships in these novels are portrayed as networks of mutual support for these work-related goals. Having a job became a significant site of identity and self-actualization for women, and the ideal love partner is expected to not only share this value system, but also to support their lover's career. It has to be noted that at the same time, traditionally feminine roles also remained a woman's domain, for instance, the heroines considered cooking and cleaning their duty. In *DEEP LOVE*, part of the heroine's appeal was her domesticity: in his love confession at the end, the love interest highlights that without her in his life, his clothes do not smell as good. In *Akairo Meikyū Marijji*, the protagonist's lack of domestic skills was a source of comedy, and love interest Sakurai helped her out with the chores—however, the underlying assumption that household duties are a wife's responsibility was never questioned. Hence, it seems that while having a job is an increasingly important site of identity, the dream novels portray it as an addition to a woman's conventional, domestic duties, as these remain important markers in the construction of femininity.

There was another theme that reflected the neoliberal value system that Lukács has described. Note how the protagonist in *Tatoe Unmei no Hito Janakute mo* characterizes her ideal soulmate:

> A person who is kind, who stays by my side, who listens to what I say, but he doesn't only listen, he also tells me his opinion. Someone whose company makes me feel good.... A person who showers me with his sweet love for a lifetime… […] Oh. Also, it's good if he has money. [...] That doesn't mean that I want to become a stay-at-home housewife. I certainly wouldn't mind living on a double income. (Chapter 10; line breaks omitted; original text is included in Appendix B)

The first part of the quote echoes some of the points already discussed in relation to the "soft" masculinities: an ideal man is supportive and listens actively, just like the self-help books suggest in Tso and Nanase's study (2017). He is also kind—this was a quality that was emphasized in other novels too, for instance in *DEEP LOVE* (Part 3, Chapter 3). However, here another criterion is highlighted: financial status.

The idols in these dream novels were almost always wealthy. This is perhaps no surprise considering that Arashi is a highly successful group, even though they never discuss or flaunt their financial status and they still cultivate a middle-class image publicly. In two out of the four AU stories in my sample, the idols were depicted to have a rather average income, but in the other two, they were successful CEOs. What was of interest is that in the novels where the idols were rich, money was primarily not a source of power or a status symbol—which is typical in romance fiction and television dramas—rather, it was a way to purchase goods. The protagonists admired the idols' apartments, their furniture, especially their kitchen and household appliances, and the love interests often took them to expensive restaurants or purchased exclusive products. Brands were often mentioned, e.g., L'Occitane cosmetics, Armani suits, Burberry trench coats. This emphasis on life-style constitutes another parallel with trendy dramas, which marked a shift towards life-style oriented entertainment that specifically targeted working women.

Chapter 2.1.3. discussed how young women emerged as prime targets of television and advertisements in the 1990s, and Chapter 2.1.4 and Chapter 3.3 explored how idol as a concept is intrinsically intertwined with consumer capitalism. This was also apparent in these dream novels, supporting Lukács's notion that "attitude and lifestyle are central to identity in a world in which affective alliances have become powerful sources of identification" (Lukács, 2010, p. 3). As I argued in the previous chapter, idols represent

a new kind of idealized masculinity which is more aesthetically conscious and less threatening. However, as this chapter demonstrates, they are also illustrative of the changing constructions of femininity. The male idol is “a symptom of a woman,” and since women’s identities are increasingly consumption-driven and determined by their labor, the dreams idols sell are intrinsically tied to consumer capitalism.

5 Conclusion

The idol as a concept is intertwined with historical and social changes. First, I investigated these elements from the production's perspective. External factors such as competition of the movie and television industries, economic upturns and stagnation, technological changes, and the formation and disintegration of the mass audiences stand out as the most influential factors in the creation of idols. I suggested that in the 1990s, a pivot took place that widened the promotion of SMAP and focused on cultural sites such as television dramas and variety shows, and consequentially, male idol groups diverged from youth culture that they were previously associated with to target female consumers with a disposable income. Since then, idols became a distinct category of celebrity in Japan that differs from other *tarento* in several regards. While the exact range of their activities is so diverse that the term itself is difficult to define, I highlighted some essential characteristics: their multimedia presence/intertextuality, the *jimusho* system, and a heightened reliance of fandom.

Idols take their fans seriously, and they consciously cultivate a close relationship with their audiences. As an outcome, fans feel that they really know the performers' authentic selves. This illusory perception was noted by the existing literature as well, but they used different terms. I suggested that the intimacy between idols and their audience should be reconceptualized as a parasocial relationship, then I proceeded with an analysis of their commercialization and the viewers' reception experiences within this theoretical context.

Idols are heavily commercialized and create profits through selling products and representing brands, but they are more than mere commodities. The relationship they cultivate with their audience means something to these fans. How people make sense of their images is a complex process, especially if we understand the audience as not a simple textual position, but as a group of actual, empirical viewers who are capable of diverse readings. While current theories assume that the female gaze is asexual, I argued that it is not necessarily so. If we consider the overall image of idols in media and fan accounts, there is plenty of supportive evidence for the existence of a sexually charged female gaze.

I conducted a thematic analysis on fan-written dream novels featuring Arashi to further explore how fans see these idols, and what are their characteristics as love objects. I first focused on plot-related themes and investigated how their status as a celebrity functions in these stories. In the real setting novels where the love interests worked as idols, fame and the widely-known dating ban was a source of excitement and food for

fantasy. Moreover, the flexibility and authenticity of the celebrity image, that is cultivated through their multi-media presence, also enticed the fans, which might explain why the pivot in the 1990s was so successful in the promotion of SMAP. Television appearances and acting roles can not only be used for exposure, as the current literature states, but they can also effectively widen and complicate a celebrity's image, which makes a fans' hunt for the „grand narrative" and the performers' authentic selves more pleasurable.

A third characteristic of appeal I highlighted was that idols embody an ideal that is moving away from the hegemonic salaryman masculinity. I argued that this is best conceptualized not as the feminization or denial of men, as some have argued, but rather as a new form of masculinity. As my sample attested, a sexually charged reading of these images is certainly possible, and idols function as safe love and sex objects for many of their fans. Androgyny here operated as an aesthetic preference—it was not masculinity that was omitted in these representations of idols, only its threatening aspects.

The idol image has also important implications for the construction of femininity. My research also highlighted that idols are deeply embedded in consumer capitalism and a neoliberal value system not only through their commercial activities, but also conceptually. Their attitudes toward work and consumption were identified as an attractive aspect of their image that appealed to working women particularly, whose identity is increasingly defined by their labor and lifestyle.

Since my research analyzed dream novels that specifically target women, its scope was naturally limited to female fans of Arashi. A possible avenue for future research could be a comparison between the findings of this study and the gaze of male Arashi fans. As I mentioned previously, locating *otakulogy* in the wider framework of fandom studies would also be intriguing, and an in-depth comparison of female and male idol fandoms in general would advance the field even further. Similarly, comparing the *yume shōsetsu* to its Western counterparts, the English-language RPFs and so-called "imagine stories" would be a prolific ground for future research.

The broader purpose of this study was to locate Japanese idols in the theoretical framework of celebrity and fan studies and to create a comprehensive account on their fans' experiences. I believe that a major theoretical contribution of this thesis to the field is the integration of parasocial phenomena to the study of idols. Parasocial relationships represent a relevant source of influence in today's society, and while their capitalization is often discussed, I think that the real extent of their full potential and power is not yet fully realized. The attention economy seems to be already here where even reality television characters can become presidents.

At the end of 2020, Arashi has started their official hiatus as a group after being in the entertainment business for over twenty years. They notified the public of this plan a year in advance, to give their fans some time to prepare for the loss. Meanwhile, they initiated quite some changes in the business practices of their agency. On their 20th anniversary, they announced that Johnny's will finally lift their ban on social media. All of their 64 singles at the time were published on streaming services on the same day, which was unimaginable before. They opened an official account on YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter, and their final year as a group was recorded in a form of a documentary that got published on Netflix. It seems that the time has come for another pivot at Johnny's that consciously and strategically cultivates parasocial relationships through these new, quasi-informal platforms. Even though Arashi disbanded as a group for a while, several members maintain they solo activities in media. Sakurai still works as a newscaster, and Ninomiya even opened his own YouTube channel a month ago. The transfer was rather seamless, and the parasocial relationship lives on.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Screenshot of search parameters and results (Retrieved 2018, April 2)

占いツクール

「嵐夢小説」の検索結果(キーワード) - 小説

サイト内 | ウェブ全体

嵐夢小説 検索 検索設定

○通常検索 ○タイトルを検索 ◉キーワード検索 ○作者検索

嵐 + 大宮, 病系, 家族, twitter, 医者, more

(ヒント) 検索からよく使うページに簡単にアクセスしよう！ new

タイプ絞込:すべて | **小説** | 検定 | 日替り | 心理テス | フロチャ | プレリス | アンケ | ホムペ | イベント | 名前占 | キャラ占 | フレーズ占 | 組合せ占 | カード | 脳内 | 成分

小説状態絞込:指定なし | 執筆中 | **完結**

小説ジャンル:指定なし | タレント | アニメ | イラスト | エッセイ/日記 | **恋愛** | ホラー | ラブコメ | ギャグ | 純文学 | ファンタジー | SF | ミステリー | 詩/ポエム | その他

並び順: 通常 | 注目順 | 新しい順 | 更新順 | **人気順**

期間: **なし** | 24時間以内 | 1週間以内 | 1ヶ月以内 | 1年以内

「**嵐夢小説**」にキーワードが一致するページ: **100件以上**のアイテムがヒットしました。1ページ目を表示しています

「嵐」タグが付いた関連ページへのリンク
関連ランキング / 注目作品 / 更新作品 / 関連の新着 / 関連キーワード作品

★★★★★ 黄色恋愛マニフェスト ＃7 [完結] (9.9点, 2636回投票) 作成:2015/6/11 6:25 / 更新:2016/3/13 4:23
☆ ＊* ☆ ＊* ☆ ＊* ☆ ＊*男運がないのに恋愛体質な私…。男も住む場所もコンタクトも奪われた時私を拾ってくれたのはイヂワルそうに笑う彼。「拾ってあげる...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 二宮和也 作者:ミイチゴ ID:novel/strawberry67

★★★★★ オトナの恋の始め方 4【S】[完結] (9.9点, 2125回投票) 作成:2016/4/24 22:47 / 更新:2016/10/11 9:13
ドラマチックな出会いそんな漫画やドラマみたいな事ってある？だけど結局いくつになっても女の子は王子様が好きだベタなデートプランもベタな花束もクサイ言葉もあり得ない...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:櫻井, 嵐, さわ 作者:さわ ID:novel/fbee0b692045

★★★★★ 黄色純情サーリアル*6 [完結] (9.9点, 2029回投票) 作成:2016/2/9 23:28 / 更新:2016/10/13 2:46
「愛なんて叫ぶもんじゃないでしょ？男は黙って態度で示せ！」…なんて自分のPVを見ながら熱くなってるアイドルさんは今日も勝手に人んちへ上がり込み勝手に人んちの冷...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 二宮和也 作者:ミイチゴ ID:novel/strawberry118

★★★★★ 恋愛対象外【0125BD】[完結] (10点, 1728回投票) 作成:2017/1/23 19:39 / 更新:2017/8/12 23:18
大学時代。偶然、仲良くなった彼。一緒にいるうちに彼に惹かれていた。だけど、私は、彼にとって【恋愛対象外】"友達"としてずっと近くにいるために、自分の気持ちを隠し...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 櫻井翔 作者:でいじぃ ID:novel/sho2017hbd

★★★★★ Masquerade【YELLOW】[完結] (9.9点, 1904回投票) 作成:2015/11/8 0:43 / 更新:2016/1/21 23:29
私の気持ちは、アナタにバレちゃいけない。・・・だから、私は。心に、仮面をつけたの。☆*:.。.。.*☆*:.。。.*☆*:.。。.*☆いつも読ん...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 二宮和也, ニノ 作者:でいじぃ ID:novel/masquerade_N

★★★★★ DEEP LOVE4【S.S】[完結] (9.9点, 1774回投票) 作成:2015/8/12 7:48 / 更新:2017/5/13 20:17
....重い女いかがですか？男の方から寄ってくるのに決まって「疲れた」とふられる女フラれた日には自分を慰めるために必ず立ち寄る隠れ家bar。そこにいたあの人に拾...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:櫻井翔, 嵐, さわ 作者:さわ ID:novel/fbee0b692025

★★★★★ 赤色迷宮マリッジ＃4 [完結] (10点, 1710回投票) 作成:2015/8/18 22:01 / 更新:2016/10/13 2:45
°+o。。o+°▽°+o。。o+°▽°+o。「俺のこと好きとか？」「どちらでもないです！」「なら、結婚しよう。」「はい！！」70年前おじ...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 櫻井翔 作者:ミイチゴ ID:novel/strawberry80

★★★★★ たとえ運命の人じゃなくても【nino】[完結] (10点, 1498回投票) 作成:2015/1/29 20:22 / 更新:2018/1/3 0:40
----------『運命の人』、じゃないかもしれないけどさ、俺で我慢してよ。----------どうも。に...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 二宮和也, にじます 作者:にじます ID:novel/fortune-nino

★★★★★ 天国は、お隣 [完結] (10点, 1319回投票) 作成:2017/7/29 18:09 / 更新:2017/8/6 22:02
レンガの向こうは未知の世界丸い誘惑、筆の視線、妖艶な館。主の椅子に、麗しの王。覗けば天国、それとも地獄。一度きりの人生、地獄を見てもいいじゃない。扉は開いた！さ...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 夏, コラボ 作者:櫻ビルヂング管理人 ID:novel/ochina050270

★★★★★ Gimmick Love game 2【N】[完結] (9.9点, 1514回投票) 作成:2016/2/12 22:33 / 更新:2017/5/23 3:48
あなたと出会ってしまった瞬間からもう手遅れだったのかもしれない好きすぎて...コントロールが効かなくなるだけど知ってるほかに誰かがいることも見せかけだけの愛し...
ジャンル:恋愛 キーワード:嵐, 二宮和也 作者:さわ ID:novel/fbee0b692040

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 次のページ»

Appendix B

Original text of the longer quotes used

Kiiro Ren'ai Manifesto, Chapter 44 (line breaks mostly omitted for conciseness):

必死に抵抗をするけど
やっぱり男性の力には敵わなくて
悪あがきで壁をドンドン叩くけど
全然やめてくれない。
あんなに好きだったのに…
身体が全力で拒絶する。
「いやッ！やめて！お願い！！」
「本気に見えないけど…？」
「ほ…本気だよ。ね、本当にやめ…」
「それ、ソソるな笑」
男性の家に、
ましてや付き合ってた人の家に行くのに
こんなことがあるって
なんで危険を予知出来なかったんだろ。
自分の馬鹿さ加減と
女の無力さに涙が出る。
諦めかけたその時…。
.
ピンポーン…
ピンポーン…
ピンポーン
ピンポーン
ピンポーン
ピンポーン
ピンポーン
ピンポーン
ピンポーン

ピンポーン！！！
止まないピンポーンの嵐。
「んだよ！いいとこなのに！！」
あまりのしつこさに
痺れを切らし玄関を少しだけ開けるタクミ。
ガチャッ…
「なに？」
「ちわーす、ニノナリ急便です。」

Akairo Meikyū Marijji, Chapter 110:

「お前の"守る"なんて自己満なだけ。
もし、お前のせいでおおごとになって
(名前)が学校を辞めることになったら？
(名前)から教師という大切なものを奪うことになったら？
それは"守る"どころか傷つけてるよな？」

「……。」

「俺ならこいつの大切なモノを守るのが愛だと思うけどな。」

Kiiro Junjō Sāriaru, Chapter 207:

私が思ってた以上に
私たちが交わした約束は
カズの中で大きなものとなっていて

まさか
背中を押されるなんて思ってもみなかった…。

カズはそれだけ私に期待してくれてる。

私よりも。

「俺に出来ることは
(名前)の可能性を信じることしかないからね。
無責任な事を言ってるかもしれないけど
夢、見させてよ…
いつの間にか(名前)の夢は
俺の夢にもなってたんだよ。」

Tatoe Unmei no Hito Janakute mo, Chapter 10 (some of the line breaks omitted):

「優しくて、そばにいてくれて、話し聞いてくれて、聞くだけじゃなくてちゃんと意見も言ってくれて、一緒にいると心地よくて・・・甘い愛を一生囁いてくれる人・・・」

そんな人、いそうでいて、いない。

全部揃ってそうな人もどこか、かけてる。

なんて、自分だって男の人からしたら理想からほど遠いだろう。

みんな妥協して生きてる。

「・・・それって、」

「あ。あとお金持ってる人がいい」

「・・・・・」

別に専業主婦になりたいわけじゃない。

共働きだっていいし。