



Barbara Holthus

*Paarbeziehungen in japanischen  
Frauenzeitschriften seit 1970.  
Medien und Geschlecht in Japan*  
[Partner Relationships in Japanese Women's  
Magazines since 1970. Media and Gender in Japan]

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reviewed by [Stephanie Assmann](#)

1. The objective of Barbara Holthus' study is to illuminate how representations of partner relationships in women's magazines further our understanding of the construction of gender roles in Japan and how representations of gender relations have changed over time. The author positions her work at the intersection of gender studies and media studies; this is underlined by the subtitle of this study. The focus of the analysis is promising, since prior studies have primarily addressed contemporary women's magazines with regards to the questions of media and consumption which correlate with the large amount of visual content and the prevalence of articles on fashion, cosmetics and beauty.<sup>[1]</sup>
2. The book is divided into three parts. Part I describes the theoretical and methodological framework. Drawing on media studies methodology, the author applies the novel approach of combining a quantitative and qualitative content analysis with a diachronic and synchronic analysis on four themes 'men,' 'love,' 'sexuality,' 'marriage and divorce' conducted through a coding system using terms related to love, sexuality and marriage (pp. 228–36). The study is based on an investigation of 1694 articles on partner relationships taken from four women's magazines between 1970 and 2000. The selection of women's magazines *An an*, *More*, *Croissant* and *Fujin kōron* is appropriate due to the representation of various target groups with regards to age and social strata (pp. 183–208). All magazines are well known and widely read in Japan (p. 184). *An an* (founded in 1970) is primarily read by women in their teens and early twenties, whereas *More* (founded in 1977) targets women in their twenties and early thirties who are investigating marriage prospects and potential partners. *Croissant* (founded in 1977) is read by various age groups whereas *Fujin kōron* (founded in 1916) is read by women in their forties and fifties who are predominantly married and have family lives. Holthus adds a cross-regional reception analysis carried out with eleven women living in Tokyo, in Shikoku, which is a rural area in the southeast of Japan, and two women living in Honolulu (pp. 150–68).
3. Part II highlights social changes in Japan between 1970 and 2000. The time frame of this study is wisely chosen for two reasons. The 1970s were impacted by the onset of mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War and for equal rights of women that formed the women's liberation movement in Japan. Further, the onset of publications of magazines targeting younger age groups such as *An an* (1970) and *Non no* (1971) marked the beginning of an 'era of women's magazines' (*josei zasshi no jidai*) (p. 18). It is intriguing that some areas of Japanese society have been subject to social change while other areas

remain relatively constant. Dramatic transformations concern demographic developments in Japan that involve the aging of society,<sup>[2]</sup> the decrease of the marriage rate and the birth of fewer children.<sup>[3]</sup> Supported by legal frameworks such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) enacted in 1986, women have experienced progress in the workplace. However, continuities remain. Women tend to leave the work force upon marriage or the birth of children. Divorce rates in Japan remain low by international comparison as do the number of single parent families and cohabiting unmarried couples.

10. In explaining the criteria for the choice of the investigated magazines, part III forms the transition to the core parts of the book (part IV to part VII) which present the results of the content analysis. Four results of the investigation struck me as particularly important. First, a prescriptive tone and a functionalist approach toward partner relationships remains a reoccurring theme in women's magazines.<sup>[4]</sup> In this context, Holthus speaks of women's magazines as 'socialization agents' that construct normative partner relationships and form partner behavior (p. 491). Holthus reveals the extent to which magazines targeting younger readers between 18 and 24 years instruct their readers on sensitive topics such as dating, sexuality, pregnancy, contraception and marriage but also reprimand them on how they need to be, dress and behave in order to be appreciated by men and to gain and lead fulfilling partner relationships.
11. Second, the synchronic analysis of women's magazines reveals significant differences. The role of magazines as 'socialization agents' is gradually replaced as a place of 'exchange of experiences' in *Croissant* and *Fujin kōron* that target older readers (p. 364). Partner relationships are idealised and romanticised in magazines targeting younger readers, whereas critical aspects of gender relations such as divorce, sexual harassment, and HIV/AIDS and more controversial topics such as marriage as a societal institution, menopause, sex and old age, homoerotic relationships and the practice of partner swapping are discussed more openly in the magazines targeting older age groups, in particular in *Fujin kōron* which targets the oldest age group of women in their forties and fifties.
12. Third, the diachronic content analysis of women's magazines reveals an increasing diversification of lifestyles. During the time period of thirty years, it has become more tolerable to discuss options such as getting married at an age beyond the age considered appropriate (*tekireiki*), or even not getting married at all. Also, the question of the appropriate age to have children, or the option to remain childless is discussed. However, despite this emphasis on pluralistic lifestyles, the representation of gender relations remains fixed and standardised. The binary opposition of 'male' versus 'female' remains intact which points to continuities in women's magazines. Heterosexual relationships continue to be the presupposed norm although *Fujin kōron* and *An an do* address homoerotic relationships between women but not among men. Further, the construction of the ethnic binary opposition of 'Japanese' versus 'Western' remains unquestioned. 'Western' partners from industrialised countries such as France, Great Britain, Sweden and the United States are characterised as 'progressive' (p. 363) on the one hand and idealised and eroticised on the other. The latter is a phenomenon which the author terms 'reverse orientalism' (p. 315). Based on these results, Holthus suggests that the analysis of women's magazines should be conducted along the axes 'age,' 'ethnicity,' and 'gender' (pp. 17 and 497).
13. The relevance of the work lies in my opinion in the revelation of gender relations as normative constructions which shows that—despite the diversification of lifestyles—lifestyle decisions are not supposed to transgress age, gender, and ethnic boundaries but need to be lived and experienced within these boundaries. In this context, the author uses the idea of women's voices as 'biography generators' that create 'narrative identities' providing readers of women's magazines with a space to discuss their personal experiences with partner relationships. The use of 'biography generators' is a definite strength of the book, especially

in combination with the scale and depth of the content analysis. Holthus reveals the medium of women's magazines as an essential—and thus far underestimated—source in analysing gender relations against the background of social change, which is an absolute merit of this study. Anyone interested in gender studies will benefit from discovering contemporary women's magazines as a valid source of gender narratives. Considering the rise in marriages among Japanese and non-Japanese, further research on the representation of ethnicity is essential as is a study regarding the representation of sexual minorities in the media.

16. However, despite the merits of this study a book review should also offer a critique. The comprehensive scale of the data set can be indeed considered representative, and students of both sociology and anthropology getting familiarised with methodologies will greatly benefit from this book. However, the scale of the quantitative analysis, albeit impressive, cannot conceal certain limitations of the qualitative analysis, in particular with regards to the role of women's magazines as 'socialization agents' that 'construct norms and prescribe normative behavior' (p. 491). In my opinion, this finding requires additional validation, for example through a comparative study with institutional 'socialization agents' such as schools, universities, the workplace and the family. Further, the author includes social stratification as a factor in targeting readers of women's magazines (p. 184) at the beginning of the analysis but does not further elaborate on the gender dimension of social stratification with regards to women's magazines in Japan. Her emphasis remains on the three axes 'age,' 'gender' and 'ethnicity.' I wonder whether a greater inclusion of the impact of social stratification might have revealed crucial results, in particular with regards to the role of women's magazines as 'socialization agents.' In addition, some minor details caught my eye. Certain terms in the book require more explanation such as the practice of *enjo kōsai* (paid dating) which is mentioned in passing with regards to love and sexuality but not further elaborated upon and not discussed as a potentially abusive practice (pp. 387–88). Works of Simone de Beauvoir and Alice Schwarzer are repeatedly referred to throughout the book and would deserve an entry in the bibliography. Further, certain sections such as the elaboration of the production of women's magazines (pp. 128–49) and the German-Japanese comparison of women's magazines (pp. 119–27) remain without thoroughgoing impact on the core analysis of the book and could have been more efficiently discussed in separate articles. Finally, the length of the book (including an appendix and bibliography, the work is more than 600 pages long) makes the book less accessible which is unfortunate. It would be desirable for the author to publish the content analysis in a more accessible form, such as a journal article.
17. That being said, the recognition of women's magazines as an object of serious academic study and the role of 'biography generators' combined with the innovative methodological framework make Holthus' work an essential study and underline the significance of women's magazines as a mirror of societal gender norms and expectations in Japanese society.

## Endnotes

[1] John R. Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997; Chizuko Ueno, *'Watashi' sagashi geemu: Yokubō shimin shakai-ron* (The Search for the 'Me' Game: a Social Theory of Desire for Self-hood), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1992; Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (eds), *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995; Nancy R. Rosenberger, 'Fragile Resistance, Signs of Status: Women between State and Media in Japan', in *Re-Imaging Japanese Women*, ed. Anne E. Imamura, London: Open University Press, 1996, pp. 12–45.

[2] Japan is undergoing significant demographic changes and has a declining population. The population of Japan amounted to 128,085 million as of 2005. According to the estimates by the UN Population Division, the population will decline to 124,489 million people in 2020 and is expected to fall further to 118,252 million people in 2030.

Japan's population is also aging. Life expectancy is among the highest in the world at 78.3 years for males and 85.3 years for females. The number of persons aged 65 years and over is expected to rise until 2030. For example, according to the estimates of the Japanese government, the number of females in their mid-eighties is forecast to rise to 800,000. (Japan Statistical Yearbook, [Population Pyramid](#), online: <http://www.stat.go.jp/data/nenkan/pdf/z02-2.pdf>, accessed 24 March 2010).

[3] Japan's total fertility rate has been declining since the 1970s. After reaching a first time record low of 1.57 in 1989, the total fertility rate further declined to 1.32 in 2006 and currently resides at an average rate of 1.26. See Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (ed.). [White Paper on Birth-declining Society](#), First Chapter: Current Situation of Few Children [Shōshika no genjō], online: [http://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/whitepaper/w-2009/21pdfhonpen/pdf/b1\\_1\\_01.pdf](http://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/whitepaper/w-2009/21pdfhonpen/pdf/b1_1_01.pdf), accessed 27 March 2010.

[4] See also Keiko Tanaka, 'Japanese women's magazines: the language of aspiration,' in *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D.P. Martinez, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 110–32.

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