**Queer Space, Gender, and Sexuality vs. Traditional Systems of Power in Anime**

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**Abstract**

Since its emergence in the late 20th century, Anime, or Japanese animation, has grown in global popularity, creating strong connections to consumerism and fan culture. Our work integrates television studies, animation studies, Anime studies, and queer studies to analyze the popular television series, *Ouran: High School Host Club*. We will provide a detailed textual analysis of the series using existing literature on Japanese culture, specifically on how the club and educational system interact with depictions of queer gender and sexuality. Our final paper will examine how the series constructs queerness by obscuring heterosexuality and gender conformance through costume, sensuality, and eroticism. By focusing on sequences where outside characters, who conform to the traditional power structures, interact with the queer space, we observe how the queer characters either transform or defeat others who conform to trends of heteronormativity. Through our examination of the conflict between queerness and the systems of power in *Ouran: High School Host Club*, we indicate further questions for analyzing other Anime works.

**Narrative**

**Introduction**

Anime is a notable style of Japanese animation that has grown from graphic novels called Manga into a global phenomenon that has earned praise from all ages. Anime has put Japan at the center of pop culture, as the global anime market is valued at 25.46 billion dollars in 2021 alone. Anime influences prominent social trends and the economic status of Japan as the enfranchisement of popular series impacts consumer culture, expanding Anime’s global exposure. Anime series have grown into transmedia platforms, as popular characters and series can be found in mainstream video games and merchandise, contributing to the entertainment industry and trends in consumerism (Condry).

For an industry with such a wide platform on which to discuss social issues, Anime unfortunately tends to primarily remain consistent in its depiction of heteronormative relationships and identities. However, these recurring themes perpetuate the idea that only heterosexual identities should be expected and gender stereotypes are accurate. However, the popular 2006 anime *Ouran: High School Host Club* changes this tired narrative completely, depicting Queer gender and sexuality under the influence of the oppressive, hierarchical educational system of Japan. The protagonist, Haruhi, is shown switching gender presentation throughout the series, pretending to be a member of the male host club that is dedicated to pleasing female students. This instance of fluid expression and the creation of a queer space conflicts with the strict institutions of social class and power that are present at their school, as the majority of students belong to traditional and rich families. This interaction between queer characters and institutionalized power is an area where further study is required to fully understand the complex dynamics of the situation.

**Background / Related Work and Motivation**

Susan Napier, a professor of the Japanese studies program at Tufts, describes Anime as a cultural phenomenon in both Japan and Western cultures as well as an uncompromising art form which deals with complex themes that challenge and criticize traditional roles within society. My research partner and I hope to apply this understanding of Anime’s numerous functions to our analysis of the series *Ouran: High School Host Club* and how it serves as a prominent piece of Queer media. We plan to build upon the research that has been done on the formal elements of Anime and how they provide commentary on Japanese culture. There is a creative continuity in the animation styles from Kabuki to current Anime series, as both utilize highly dramatic aspects to portray fluidity in gender and sexuality. The seamless fluidity of character expression that animation creates cannot be as effortlessly replicated in live-action television, making it important to understand the techniques that Anime uses to display queer sexuality and gender. The nonconformity of certain characters and relationships oppose traditional systems of power, gender, and family (Napier). Therefore, queer expression in Anime provides relevant insight into how media challenges conformist ideologies and systems.

In our research, we hope to conduct a literature review on relevant work from the fields of Anime studies, Queer Gender and Sexuality studies, and Japanese Cultural studies to create a framework that we can apply to our analysis of *Ouran: High School Host Club.* Our goal is to add to the existing literature on these topics, expanding the amount of research that has been done on Queer expression and the influence of traditional power in Japanese culture in Anime series. Sources that apply to Anime studies analyze how the artform has developed and changed different tropes, such as Napier’s book *Anime from* Akira *to* Princess Mononoke. Ian Condry’s *The Soul of Anime* discusses how Anime has grown and adapted to trends over time, providing a comprehensive history of the important elements that are a part of the creative development process. I plan to use information from these sources to study Anime’s growth, as well as important tropes that are present in *Ouran: High School Host Club.* I hope to synthesize how all of these elements have come together to create depictions of queerness.

Another source that I plan to analyze is *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan* which was edited by Mark Mclelland and Romit Dasgupta. This book analyzes the realities of having a queer identity in Japan, while the article “The Queering of Haruhi Fujioka: Cross-Dressing, Camp and Commoner Culture in Ouran High School Host Club” by Tania Darlington instead analyzes how these systems exist in popular Anime series. I hope to use the series *Ouran: High School Host Club* to further understand how these strict institutions interact with queer gender and sexuality within the greater context of Japan as depicted in serialized Anime. My partner and I’s research seeks to answer the following question: How do queer identities conflict with traditional systems of power in popular Anime series?

**Method**

Film studies research is qualitative in nature and applies a framework derived from relevant scholarly sources to different forms of media through analysis. My research partner and I will be basing our research method in these practices.

The first section of our research method will be to analyze relevant scholarly sources in order to define the terms we will be applying to the Anime series that we study. Beginning with an analysis of queer theory, we will provide distinct definitions of gender and sexuality. We also plan to review literature on how fluidity in gender and sexuality expression can conflict with traditional institutions of power.

Delving into Japanese cultural studies, we plan on researching the societal conventions and institutions of power found in Japan. Then, we will review the relevant literature around film studies, Anime studies and animation studies to expand our understanding of the formal and narrative elements of Anime. After completing a literature review of works in the fields of film studies, queer studies, anime studies, animation studies and Japanese cultural studies, we will select the information that is relevant to creating our framework for analysis.

  After reaching an academic understanding of sociopolitical institutions and elements of film, we will apply this research to *Ouran: High School Host Club,* analyzing the expressions of gender and sexuality in relation to systems of power represented in the series. Additionally, we will examine formal elements of Anime. Finally, after completing our analysis, we will determine our conclusions to our research question of how different Anime series depict the interaction between fluidity of gender and sexuality and traditional system of power in the context of Japanese culture. From our conclusion, we will write a paper compiling our research and our conclusions.

**Expected Results**

We will use our research to write a paper that analyses several sequences in *Ouran: High School Host Club* that we believe depict the construction of queer space, gender, and sexuality. We plan to synthesize our research to explain how these elements confront traditional systems of power in the series. Our paper will include an in-depth textual analysis of how the formal elements of Anime contribute to the creation of fluidity with these characters and spaces. We hope to include our framework devised from existing scholarly works that expand upon foundational articles in Japanese cultural studies, Queer studies, and Anime studies to support our research.

We expect that in our research we will find that *Ouran: High School Host Club* displays the tension between the sociopolitical institutions of power displayed in Japanese cultural society and queer communities. Additionally, we will study how *Ouran: High School Host Club* deals with issues involving oppressive class hierarchies, analyzing how the rich take advantage of others through performance and exploitation. We will end our paper by explaining the limitations of our own research and implications for future works in our field.

**Conclusion**

As Anime’s popularity continues to grow, it is important to continue analyzing how the medium is influencing global trends and telling impactful stories. Considering how Anime utilizes distinct formal elements in its animation, the expansive artform is fit for depictions of queerness. *Ouran: High School Host Club* is a monumental piece of both Anime and queer media that depicts how queer communities can form and persevere in the face of constant oppression. The series expertly subverts heteronormative expectations, providing groundbreaking representation of queer characters. I plan to analyze how these gender and sexuality expressions function under oppressive sociopolitical institutions of power in the cultural context of Japan. We will take in interdisciplinary approach, conducting a literature review into film studies, queer studies, Anime studies, animation studies, and Japanese cultural studies. By the end of our research, my research partner and I hope to present a paper reporting our findings.

Works Consulted

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**Budget**

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| --- | --- |
| Description of Expense | Cost |
| Compensation for 20 hours a week for one researcher for 6 weeks at a minimum wage | $1800 |
| Netflix subscription for two months at $9.00 / month | $18 |
| TOTAL: | $1818 |

**Timeline**

Week 1

* I will work alongside my research partner to identify relevant scholarly works in the fields of film studies, Queer theory studies, animation studies, Anime studies and Japanese cultural studies.
* I will create a list of 25 – 30 sources for literature review.

Week 2

* I will read and annotate my sources.
* I will create pages of notes on the sources, including page numbers for our final paper.
* I will write my section of the paper dedicated to background information.
* I will identify key elements of Anime that will assist my analysis of Ouran High School Host Club.
* By the end of this week, I will have completed a separate review of the literature that will be used in our analysis.

Week 3

* I will watch the first 13 episodes of Ouran High School Host Club.
* I will take notes on relevant sequences that provide insight on the question that we are answering.
* I will meet with my research partner and mentor to discuss our findings.

Week 4

* I will watch the final 13 episodes of Ouran High School Club.
* I will continue to take notes on the relevant sequences of the series.
* I will continue to meet with my research partner and mentor to discuss our findings and how they relate to our previous research.

Week 5

* My research partner and I will create a detailed outline of the final paper and our argument about how Ouran High School Host Club constructs Queerness space and characters that confront traditional systems of power.
* I will discuss with my research partner who is writing which sections of the paper based on our outline.

Week 6

* I will write half of the paper using the outline.
* I will meet with my research partner and mentor to give and receive feedback on our sections of the paper.
* I will revise and proofread the final paper.
* By the end of this week my research partner and I should have a paper communicating our research question, literature review, methods, evidence and conclusion.