

## **Japanese Perspectives on Feminism**

Japanese Film Audiences' Interpretation of Feminist Themes in *Promising Young Woman*

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## ABSTRACT

*Film is one arena where feminist topics and debates become visible, and this is also the case in Japan. This research explores the Japanese local perception of the feminist themes portrayed in Promising Young Woman, often called one of the most significant “post-MeToo” films, which intersects with two significant trends in contemporary feminist discourse: the third wave (or post-feminism) and the fourth wave. Like the protagonist in Promising Young Woman, Western (White) middle- and upper-class feminists have been dominantly represented in contemporary feminism academia and media. The contrast between feminist discourse in the First World (West) and the one in the Third World has been emphasized in previous research, but Japan’s case has often been excluded, due to its global position, which belongs neither to the West nor to the Third World. To tackle such an academic gap, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How do film audiences in Japan perceive and engage with feminist themes in Promising Young Woman, and how do these perceptions intersect with the representation and position of women in Japanese society in the context of feminism? With a theoretical backbone of feminism, active audience and transnational audience, this study conducts a thematic analysis of comments from film audiences in Japan on Promising Young Woman, sourced from the largest Japanese film review website, Filmmarks. The researcher separates the discourses analytically by looking for two topics: (A) Engagement with feminist themes and (B) Transnational meaning-making of feminist themes. For the category (A), the researcher identifies the themes of: (a) (Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes, (b) (Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes, (c) Disaffirming feminist themes and (d) Reflecting feminist themes in everyday life. The category (B) is divided into the themes of: (e) Collectively engaging with feminist themes (f) Personally engaging with feminist themes and (g) Emotionally engaging with feminist themes. Overall, the analysis reveals that trends of “feminist affirmations” and “cinematic politicization” are widely observed in comments. Additionally, audiences tend to reflect their lives and surroundings through the feminist themes portrayed in the film. The implication of this research is that audiences become active participants in feminist activism by making these comments. In Japan, a collective society where people deeply value harmony within people, a digital platform like Filmmarks seems to work best for them because it allows users to freely express their thoughts. This anonymity encourages engagement without fear of negative consequences, fostering a space where individuals can challenge patriarchy.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Feminism, Post-feminism, Feminism in Japan, Active audience, transnational audience*

## Table of Contents

### Abstract and keywords

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Theoretical framework.....	4
2.1 Feminism .....	4
2.1.1 Feminism in Japan .....	7
2.2 Active audiences.....	11
2.2.1 Active audiences and feminism .....	12
2.2.2 Transnational audiences.....	13
3. Methods .....	17
3.1 Explanation and justification of the case.....	17
3.2 Sampling and data collection.....	18
3.3 Thematic analysis.....	20
3.4 Credibility of research and ethical considerations .....	21
4. Results .....	24
4.1 Engagement with feminist themes.....	24
4.1.1 (Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes .....	24
4.1.2 (Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes .....	27
4.1.3 Disaffirming feminist themes .....	31
4.1.4 Reflecting feminist themes in everyday lives .....	33
4.2 Transnational meaning-making of feminist themes.....	36
4.2.1 Collectively engaging with feminist themes .....	37
4.2.2 Personally engaging with feminist themes.....	41
4.2.3 Emotionally engaging with feminist themes .....	42
5. Conclusion .....	44
5.1 Limitations and future research .....	48
References.....	51
Appendix: Final code trees.....	61

## 1. Introduction

With an interest in contemporary debates about feminism and women's representation and societal position in Japan, this thesis will look into how these topics are interpreted and further discussed by people in Japan in the context of film consumption.

In Japan, feminist activism has historically been weaker than that in the West and feminist studies there is also considered a weak academic field (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 144-172). The state of feminist scholarship in Japan is also mirrored in the state of everyday forms of feminism in the country. For example, while the MeToo movement originated in the U.S. quickly spread across the globe (Ghadery, 2019, pp. 254-257) thanks to the globalization and development of communications technology (Wang, 2021, p. 46), it made less impact in Japan, even compared to other East Asian countries, such as South Korea (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019, p. 98; Donohue, 2020, pp. 72-79). The weak feminist activism in Japan has to do a lot with a Japanese collectivist society, where people value a harmony and conformity among people, and speaking up as individuals is considered as damaging to a society (Donohue, 2020, pp. 76-78). After the MeToo movement, a number of Japanese women revealed their full names and faces and spoke up in public to confess their experiences of being sexually assaulted. However, they received an enormous backlash, not only from men but also from women. In addition to this, a history of Japanese law enforcement aimed at raising more opportunities for women to work equally with men has resulted in women having to deal with both caring for their families and becoming part of the workforce. Moreover, the influence of a neoliberal society, where people mainly care about their own career success and no one else, has also made it difficult for Japanese women to raise a sense of solidarity to combat women's issues, according to Kikuchi, a Japanese researcher specializing in gender and sexuality issues (Ako, 2022). This stagnant situation surrounding women is reflected in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023, which reports that Japan ranks 125th among the 146 countries surveyed (Pal et al., 2023, p. 11).

Film is one arena where feminist topics and debates become visible, and this is also the case in Japan. In this thesis, the researcher is particularly interested in the local reception of the critically acclaimed American film, *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020), a feminist revenge thriller depicting a woman seeking revenge for her best friend's sexual assault and subsequent suicide, tackling the issues of sexual violence, women's oppression in the patriarchal world, and other issues surrounding women. This feminist portrayal follows a

contemporary feminist trend, “post-feminism,” or “the third wave,” which is closely connected to neoliberalism. Additionally, it is often described as one of the most important post-MeToo films and has sparked many online discussions about its feminist portrayal (Benson-Allott, 2021; Walker, 2021). The film’s influence from the MeToo movement also reflects the trend of “the fourth wave,” which is associated with technology and the use of social media, encouraging activism and the “call-out” culture to rise. In Japan, it has been overall positively received and economically successful, while many viewers have recognized it as a feminist film, connecting it to their own experiences of struggles living as women and being sexually harassed, or reflecting on the famous cases of sexual assaults and accusations in Japan. Some have compared its situation with that in the West.

Like the protagonist in *Promising Young Woman*, Western (White) middle- and upper-class feminists (Bordun, 2022, p. 27) have been overly represented in contemporary feminism and media (Phillips, 2021, p. 82). The contrast between feminist discourse in the First World (West) and the one in the Third World has been emphasized in previous research (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 61-88; Herr, 2014, pp. 1-30; Dosekun, 2015, pp. 960-975). These discussions have excluded Japan, due to its global position, which belongs neither to the West nor to the Third World (Nonaka, 2015, p. 149). These gaps in previous studies in the field of feminism beg the question of how the audience reception of such a film can shed light not only on the interpretation of feminism in Japan but also on the challenges posed by concerns and ideas specific to Japan. Additionally, this sheds light on societal attitudes towards women’s representation and positionality in society that could be developed from there. Building upon feminism, active audience, and transnational audience theories, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *How do film audiences in Japan perceive and engage with feminist themes in Promising Young Woman, and how do these perceptions intersect with the representation and position of women in Japanese society in the context of feminism?*

This academic work contributes to the scholarly resources in feminist academia in Japan, which has been relatively weak (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 144-172). While prior research on feminism in relation to media focused on female representation for example in television ads (Arima, 2003, p. 88) and soap operas (Kou, 2014, pp. 1-6), this paper aims to provide new insights into the societal impact of media, specifically film, and the act of reviewing films on social media platforms, on feminism in Japan. By exploring how feminist themes are perceived and internalized by the Japanese public through film, it seeks to foster a more nuanced

understanding of feminist ideas and their relevance in contemporary Japanese society, including the representation and positioning of women. Furthermore, this study can contribute socially by capturing often-hidden voices in Japan. For instance, a government study (Kageyama, 2016) revealed that one-third of Japanese working women have experienced sexual harassment, yet more than 60% of them chose to remain silent. Therefore, this study is in a way considered as a participation in activism, bridging the existing gap between academia and activism in Japan (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 168-171).

The next chapter of this study begins by explaining the theoretical framework used to contextualize the research question, encompassing themes of feminism, active audience and transnational audience. To answer the research question, a thematic analysis is conducted on audience reviews of *Promising Young Woman* posted on the Japanese film review platform Filmmarks (<https://filmmarks.com>). A qualitative approach is employed to capture nuanced, localized interpretations and contextual meanings (Brennen, 2017, pp. 4-5). Previous studies have demonstrated the utility of thematic analysis in examining public engagement and interpretations of feminist themes depicted in films (Paris & Uyheng, 2023, pp. 2030-2032). The methods chapter details the step-by-step procedures for sampling, data collection, and thematic analysis. The analysis identifies seven distinct themes in audience discourse: (a) *(Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes*, (b) *(Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes*, (c) *Disaffirming feminist themes*, (d) *Reflecting feminist themes in everyday life*, (e) *Collectively engaging with feminist themes* (f) *Personally engaging with feminist themes*, and (g) *Emotionally engaging with feminist themes*. These themes are explored in depth in the results chapter. In the final chapter, the conclusion summarizes findings and acknowledges the limitations of this research. It also suggests directions for future studies that could build upon these findings.

## 2. Theoretical framework

To answer the research question: *How do film audiences in Japan perceive and engage with feminist themes in Promising Young Woman, and how do these perceptions intersect with the representation and position of women in Japanese society in the context of feminism?* the researcher will draw from five bodies of literature: feminism, feminism in Japan, active audiences, active audiences and feminism, and transnational audiences. Informed by these theories, this project approaches Japanese audiences' consumption of *Promising Young Woman* as an act of localized meaning-making influenced by the elements of feminism portrayed in the film, and Japan's unique social and cultural context.

### 2.1 Feminism

Feminism is broadly understood as a theoretical framework and political action seeking to end the gender-based oppression (McAfee et al., 2023). The term "feminism" was coined after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892, following the French term "féministe" for the advocacy to achieve the equal rights for women, based on the belief of equality in sexes. The English term "feminism" has its origin in advocating for the women's right to vote in Europe and the U.S. The history of women's movements is often categorized in "waves," and each has a distinctive identity. According to Evans & Chamberlain (2015, p. 4), the first wave of feminism focused on gaining voting rights for women. The second wave, which began in the 1960s, shifted its focus to advocating for the social and personal rights of women, including equal pay and sexual and reproductive freedom. During this period, victims of sexual assault began to raise their voices about their own experiences, fundamentally changing the narrative of victims. They were no longer seen solely as recipients of traumatic experiences but as autonomous and active individuals capable of addressing their traumas even while experiencing significant mental distress (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 768).

The third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s to characterize the perspectives of young feminists of that era (Day & Wray, 2018, pp. 113-137). Concurrently, the concept of "post-feminism" gained prominence, becoming one of the most debated and divisive topics in feminist discourse today (Butler, 2013, pp. 35-40). The terms "third wave" and "post-feminism" have often been used interchangeably (Day & Wray, 2018, pp. 113-137). While there is no singular definition, post-feminism is frequently understood as an ongoing process of "undoing feminism" or "distancing from feminism." It emerged partly in reaction to the

portrayal of second wave feminists as radical and hysterical, or suggesting that feminism is no longer necessary as women have ostensibly achieved equality with men. Alternatively, it serves to reconcile the paradoxes and contradictions in women's representation (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 5). According to Gill (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, pp. 4-7), the term is used variably: Some employ it to denote a historical shift from second wave feminism, while others use it to delimit a new feminism influenced by post-colonial perspectives. To contest a stereotypical notion of post-feminism, Gill developed a way to express it as a "sensitivity," foregrounded on the idea of approaching post-feminism critically and designed to analyze popular culture empirically, to show that post-feminism is not only expressed and circulated but also received and reproduced.

In the context of Western media culture, one important debate in post-feminism surrounds the question of women's autonomy (Gill, 2007, pp. 148-164). Post-feminist practices emphasizing women's autonomy include asserting control over their bodies, embracing sexual desire, practicing self-discipline, and engaging in self-transformation. These practices coexist with anti-feminist discourses that critique women who do not conform to traditional beauty standards, either from within feminist circles or self-critically. To elaborate, femininity is defined as a bodily property and having a "sexy body" became a main identity for some women. They use these bodies as a source of power and self-monitor them to conform to female attractiveness and desirable heterosexual objects. However, this differs from earlier media eras where sexualized women were often depicted as passive. In contemporary Western media culture, women are portrayed as active agents, asserting their own desires and sexualizing themselves on their own terms. These notions of making self-choices such as "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself" is considered a form of individualism. Representations of individualistic women who derive pleasure and assert their identities while embracing traditional femininity are prevalent in major Western media titles, such as *Sex and the City* and *the Bridget Jones* series, extensively analyzed in academia (Gill, 2016, pp. 610-630). This emphasis on independence aligns closely with the autonomous and self-regulating aspects of neoliberalism, as articulated by Rottenberg (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, pp. 7-8). Neoliberalism extends beyond economic principles to encompass a political rationality that positions individuals as human capital, emphasizing internal self-management over state intervention.

However, critics argue that the neoliberal characteristics of post-feminism can lead to anti-feminism, as it tends to reduce gender inequalities to personal circumstances deemed



unworthy of collective political action (Gill, 2016, pp. 610-630). Moreover, the notion of self-empowerment through female sexual subjectivity has been questioned. Riley and her colleagues (2017, pp. 10-11) argue that women are pressured to continually pursue sexual experiences to maintain a "sexual connoisseur" status and criticize other women who do not conform to this standard. Women also have to risk themselves for receiving "slut shaming." Critically, it has been highlighted that this sexually positive narrative is often seen as a privilege reserved primarily for White women. Black and other non-White women, on the other hand, face the dangerous stereotype of hyper-sexuality, which places them at risk of unwanted sexual attention or assault. As a result, they may feel compelled to avoid asserting themselves as autonomous sexual subjects to protect themselves.

The argument that post-feminism lacks intersectionality has sparked academic discussions highlighting its focus on young, heterosexual, White, and middle-class women as the default female subject, thereby reinforcing inequalities based on race and sexuality (Butler, 2013, p. 36-37, 46-47). While there has recently been an increase in visibility of women of different races in popular media, these representations often perpetuate racial hierarchies by relegating non-White women to "sub" roles in spaces dominated by Whiteness (Butler, 2013, pp. 49-50). Scholars argue for the inclusion of representations that encompass factors such as class, disability, age, and transnational identities (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 6). Importantly, queer theory has been integrated into feminist academia, advocating for the recognition of identities beyond traditional binary notions of male and female. This includes acknowledging and addressing the visibility of bisexual and transgender individuals within feminist discourse, though discrimination against LGBTQ+ people persist within feminist communities (Munro, 2013, p. 23). These debates underscore how the third wave feminism has marked a pivotal moment by embracing intersectionality and advocating for a broader recognition of women's issues that encompass diverse identities and experiences.

The phenomenon of post-feminism seen across the landscape of popular culture is called "popular feminism" (Stuart, 1990, pp. 28-42). With its medium power, the concept of post-feminism has been (re)shaped (Kotliuk, 2022, p. 47). An important aspect of popular feminism is its role in raising awareness of feminist issues among ordinary citizens through media representation, including topics like domestic violence, equal pay and workplace harassment (Stuart, 1990, pp.28-42). According to Banet-Weiser (2020, p.9), media content aimed at girls has historically emphasized "girl power" primarily in terms of consumer influence, rather than

challenging deeper gendered power dynamics and ideologies. Moreover, explicit feminist statements were not prominently featured. Since around 2010s, more and more people started calling themselves feminists in popular culture, such as film, TV and social media, which seems to be connected to an increasing visibility of gender inequalities in economy, as shown in a lack of, for example, female CEOs and film directors (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020, pp.9-11). This trend is linked to the rise of the fourth wave feminism, which is strongly associated with the technology and the use of social media, encouraging activism to rise. The rise of “call-out” culture, stemming from the digital sphere, enabled sexism or misogyny be called out and challenged, which started appearing in everyday lives, including popular media (Munro, 2013, p.23). However, popular feminism is often criticized for not fundamentally challenging the patriarchal political and societal structures that perpetuate gender issues. Critics argue that it tends to focus on increasing the representation of women in existing power structures, rather than addressing the root causes of inequality. This critique also relates to the intersectionality concerns within post-feminism, as it tends to uphold a dominant portrayal of women as young, heterosexual, White, and middle-class, as evidenced by its predominant representation in movements like the MeToo (Phillips, 2021, p. 82).

While feminist concerns have evolved over different periods categorized into waves as described above, each wave demonstrates overlapping ideologies and narrative continuity (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015, pp. 1-12). With this in mind, the researcher acknowledges that the current feminism is shaped by influences from both the third wave (post-feminism) and the emerging fourth wave. Post-feminist practices intersecting with neoliberalism, such as women pursuing personal fulfillment and better lives solely for their own benefit, remain prevalent in society. These practices are predominantly represented in the media by White, middle- or upper-class women. However, the advent of the internet and social media has transformed feminist activism, allowing feminists globally to conceive women’s issues as more expansive and structural, transcending national borders. This transformation is evidenced by the global impact of movements like the MeToo and the rise of transnational feminist activism in the digital sphere, although the scale and influence of these movements vary across countries.

### ***2.1.1 Feminism in Japan***

Feminist theories and ideas have historically been centered around Western and White perspectives (Jonsson, 2014, pp. 1012-1027; Jonsson, 2016, pp. 50-67). This Western-centric

approach has often framed feminism as synonymous with "progress" and "modernity" for women, contrasting this with the perceived situation of women in the so-called Third World. In that sense, Western forms of feminism have been accused of re-producing colonial forms of thinking that position the West as a "savior" for women in other parts of the world. To contest such Western-centric feminism, transnational understanding of feminism has been argued as important in academia (Dosekun, 2015, pp. 960-975).

In Japan, feminism has had to deal with an extreme form of patriarchy and the division of gender roles resulting from the Confucian heritage (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 145-154). The relation between wife and husband is connected to the fundamental emphasis of its culture on the parent-child relation because they can have children (Herr, 2012, pp. 328-330). Confucian patriarchy is built on the idea that the wife-husband relation results from the alleged metaphysical differences between the sexes. In this context, women are seen as inferior to men; furthermore, women's sole virtue was submissiveness. In Japan, this norm was reconstructed with modernization, so that women became to be expected as both good wives and wise mothers, while accepting an inferior status to men (Sechiyama, 2013, pp. 60-84). Another unique context which is specific to Japan is the "ie" system, standing for the household system where a wife is brought into to live with her husband and their children (Haruko & Phillips, 1993, p. 83). This system was officially abolished in 1947 but still deeply remains in its society and laws, for example in "koseki" system. Under this system, families are considered as a unit, and the head of them is usually a husband. In turn, children are seen as successors to the father--as an example, in 2022, 94.7% of households in Japan still chose the husband's surname (Gender equality bureau cabinet office of Japan, 2022).

The contemporary feminist movement in Japan that has emerged in the 1970s is categorized as a "second wave" form of feminism (Muta, 2006, pp. 297-298), in relation to the Western typology of feminist waves. The Women's Liberation Movement called "Woman Lib" was at the heart of Japanese feminism and advocated for issues surrounding women, including the rethinking of the family system, reproduction rights and fair access to building a professional career. However, the movement's focus at the time was contesting the abortion ban law and asking for availability of contraception in Japan. The movement was also helped by international events such as the International Women's Year in 1975 organized by United Nations. In response to this, the Japanese government established the team for planning and promoting women's issues and regional states correspondingly started their own programs for

women's rights (Muta, 2006, pp. 295-297).

In 1999, the key shift in the Japanese feminist history was made: the "Basic Act for a Gender Equal Society" was passed. The act stated that women and men are equal (Muta, 2006, pp. 298-305). Around the same time, Gender Studies departments appeared in Japanese universities and discussions about gender equality emerged in popular culture. However, it was still far for women to achieve gender equality. The enforcement of the law raised an attention from the anti-gender equality group in regional councils, and they started raising their voices, which caused the situation surrounding gender equality that had been progressed so far regress. From the 1990s onwards, backlash against gender equality became more prominent in Japan. (Soku, 2014, p. 6). The backlash is generally tied to groups advocating for the protection of traditional gender roles, linking women to the reproduction of families and of the nation, and stoking fears that gender equality will lead to the disappearance of tradition in Japan (Soku, 2014, p. 112-118).

Based on this historical trajectory, the current state of feminism and women's situation in Japan remains rather precarious. According to the survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in Japan, only 12.7% of managerial or higher roles in companies are held by women, which is much lower compared to the rate of major Western countries and even other Asian countries such as Malaysia (24.9 %) or South Korea (16.3%) (The Japan Broadcasting Corporation, 2023). The number of female politicians in the Japanese cabinet is only five, which is roughly a quarter of the total members and lower compared to the standard of other G7 member countries except for Italy (Takenaka, 2023). Such gender disparity is reflected in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023, which reports that Japan ranks 125th among the 146 countries surveyed (Pal et al., 2023, p. 11). The instability of feminist progress was also apparent during the MeToo movement, when discussions about sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination remained rather small in Japan compared to Western and neighboring Asian countries. Nonetheless, in Japan, the MeToo movement became associated with a female journalist, Shiori Ito who, in 2017, publicly shared her experience of being raped by a former Washington bureau chief of the major Japanese TV broadcasting company (Miura, 2021, pp. 521-522). While she had tried to start a legal investigation on this rape, the case was strangely dropped out. Ito thus felt the only option was to come out and publicly accuse the perpetrator. However, most major Japanese newspapers and broadcast news did not report her story and victim blaming occurred on social media and other news outlets. Not only men

but also women involved in spreading hateful comments online. In collectivist countries like Japan, people deeply value the harmony and conformity among people, making it hard for women to speak up about their individual circumstances as such acts are culturally framed as damaging to society. Where in countries such as the U.S., there's more room for women to tell their stories as individuals – as in the case of Alyssa Milano, one of the icons behind the MeToo movement—in Japan such individual gestures are frowned upon (Donohue, 2020, pp.76-78).

Nonetheless, Ito's case was not without consequence, opening up the possibility for others to come forward. Indeed, in 2019, Yumi Ishikawa, a Japanese actor and writer, took a stand against the injustice of the situation where women in Japan had long suffered from experiences of being forced to wear high heels in workplaces and occasions, by posting her experience on Twitter (Blecken, 2019). This led to the rise of the "KuToo" movement, as Ishikawa's story prompted many women across Japan to share their own experiences using the hashtag "#KuToo" (a play upon "MeToo," combined with two similar words - "kutsū" is a Japanese word meaning physical and mental suffering, while "kutsu" means shoes). This Twitter hashtag activism quickly spread and became the first large-scale pushback movement against deeply rooted traditions in Japan, (Chen, 2019). Due to the pressure raised from this activism, major Japanese corporates including Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways reformed their mandatory wearing heels regulation on their flight attendants to allow flat shoes. The possible reason why the KuToo movement became a somewhat successful activism is because it was a collective one, unlike the Ito's case. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by social media platforms empowered more women to join the movement (Junxiao, 2021, pp. 65-71)

Japan's patriarchal societal norms and the representation of women are clearly reflected in research on the stereotypical portrayal of Japanese women in television advertisements, as highlighted by Arima (2003, p. 88). These portrayals often depict women as "beautiful and wise housewives," while men are shown as "middle-aged worker bees." This perpetuates the traditional stereotype of "men at work and women at home," despite the reality that many women in Japan today juggle responsibilities both at work and in the home. Interestingly, audiences tend to expect and even appreciate these traditional gender roles depicted on television. Arima's research also reveals that Japanese television advertisements tend to commercialize female sexuality. Women's youth and beauty are emphasized, reflecting a sexist perspective where women are objectified for their appearance. Surprisingly, many of these

commercials target female audiences, not males. However, frequent exposure to such depictions can influence women to internalize societal ideals of youth and beauty as essential for becoming desirable individuals, shaping their behavior and aspirations, often without conscious awareness due to the passive nature of television consumption as a form of low involvement learning. Comparative research conducted by Matthes and colleagues (2016, p. 318) across 13 Asian, American, and European countries, including Japan, supports Arima's findings. It reveals that male characters in Japanese advertisements are more often depicted in higher-income occupations compared to female characters, a trend less pronounced in other countries. Kou's study (2014, pp. 5-6) on heroines in Japanese soap operas further underscores these gender dynamics. While these characters may balance household and work responsibilities, their work is often portrayed as merely a means to sustain the household rather than for personal fulfillment. Kou argues that this setup perpetuates the traditional "ie" system, where men hold dominant roles within the household while women support them, reinforcing gender roles. These studies collectively indicate that Japan continues to exhibit traditional gender portrayals in media, reflecting broader societal norms. This suggests that Japan's progress towards gender equality lags behind other countries, which reflects a similar disparity in how the MeToo movement has affected Japan compared to other countries.

## **2.2 Active audiences**

To understand how Western films provoke localized discourses about feminism, the researcher also draws from active audience theories. "Active audience" stands for the idea that audiences are always active in their consumption of media texts and that media texts themselves are always open for different interpretations (Morley, 1994, pp. 255-261). The active audience paradigm has developed in reaction to the assumption that people only watch television in a passive way and the message from the content is undoubtedly received by them, countering the argument such as audience imitating violence shown on television, proving that it has some "effect" on them (Barker, 2008, p. 326). Instead, the traditional theories suggest that media audiences actively produce the meaning from what they see, within their cultural context. Hall (1980, pp. 128-138) famously argued that while media influence how people understand and make sense of the world, they are not only passively receiving information from the media. His "encoding/decoding" model stands for that creators or producers of the media contents have the ability to incorporate specific messages or

ideologies into the contents through "encoding," but the audience reception of these messages is not consistently uniform. Depending on an individual's social standing and cultural perspective, they may "decode" media messages in different ways.

Based on Hall's foundational work, Morley conducted research on British news programs to examine how societal and cultural factors such as race, class, and educational backgrounds influence audience interpretation (1980, pp. 266-279). The findings demonstrated that these factors significantly shape how audiences decode media content, with social class emerging as the most influential category. The "agreement" decoding was majorly done by conservative socially high-ranked people such as bank managers, and the "negotiation" decoding was done by a middle-class or higher working-class people such as trade union representatives. Meanwhile, working-class individuals or racial minorities often adopted an "opposition" stance, actively challenging or feeling excluded from the perspectives presented in the news program.

### **2.2.1 Active audiences and feminism**

The film industry is increasingly adapting to contemporary feminism (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017, pp. 885-887). Yet, the topic of how active audiences make sense of feminist themes in film requires more attention. Ang did research on the audience interpretation of the American television series *Dallas* among Dutch female viewers (1982, pp. 1-136), and concluded that audiences are actively involved in consuming media entertainment in a way that provides them pleasure. She claimed that fiction is a way to enjoy the present moment, involving a mixture of feelings from involvement, distance, acceptance, to protest among audiences. The pleasure of watching *Dallas* partially comes from identification; for female audiences, watching it provides them with expressions of contradiction within patriarchy. The point is not whether female characters in the show resolve such patriarchal problems, but rather that such problems are recognized and validated there. She argued that a realistic approach to stories on an empirical level is not as important as long as audiences perceive them as realistic on an emotional level.

The study by Paris and Uyheng (2023, p. 2041) examined how an active audience interprets the female-centric film, *Birds of Play*, using a theoretical framework of post-feminism. They identified two major patterns of audience responses: "feminist affirmations"

and "cinematic politicization," indicating that audiences actively engaged with feminist themes in the film, contributing to feminist activism. The study revealed that audience reactions to the feminist portrayal in the film went beyond simple acceptance or rejection, aligning with Gill's (2007, pp. 148-164) concept of "post-feminist sensibility." This perspective highlights how modern feminists interact with media culture by producing their own interpretations, rather than conforming to a singular viewpoint. The discourse on feminist affirmations intersected with both the politicization and depoliticization of feminist topics within the film. For instance, some audiences who positively perceived the feminist aspects of the film avoided interpreting it through a political lens. This nuanced approach underscores the complexity of audience engagement with feminist media and reflects broader debates within post-feminist theory.

As these research and other previous studies (Robinson, 2011, pp. 111–124; Agirre, 2012, pp. 155–170; McClearen, 2015, pp. 833–846; Swink, 2017, pp. 14–28) showed, feminist audience research has focused on White audiences and their interpretation of feminist discourses in popular films or television. One recurrent finding was that these audiences' "embeddedness" in a Western post-feminist culture help them relate to the post-feminist topics in films. As an exception, the comparative analysis of the perception between the West and China has been explored by Huang (2023, pp. 53-63), and the findings highlighted that Chinese people are more sensitive to the feminist themes and highly valued the authenticity and social issues portrayed in films. As these findings showed and Hall (1980, pp. 128-138) argued how people interpret texts in media is deeply connected with their own societal and cultural lens, further exploration on the perspectives of non-Westerners in this field is important.

### ***2.2.2 Transnational audiences***

As stated in the previous paragraph, the theoretical lens of active audiences is even more important in the context of transnational consumption of popular media. The origin of transnationalism comes from a discussion about migrants and identity in the U.S. in 1919, which came into use in an effort to internationalize American politics within a broader world network (Clavin, 2005, pp. 433-444). The term was primarily used for inter-states relations, and it was also adapted by multinational corporations in order to rebrand themselves as transnational corporations because "multinational" had an association with greed and inequality. The presence of the term started becoming more apparent when it became part of



academic discussion in 1970s. Since the 1980s, the term has started being associated with historians seeking to go beyond dominant national paradigms. Transnationalism has become increasingly visible against the background of the intensification of globalization, where flows of people, machinery, money, images and ideas are increasingly crossing boundaries and creating "ideoscapes," including freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation and democracy, that cross traditional national boundaries (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 36-37)

In the context of media, the shift into transnational paradigms from national paradigms has occurred due to a recognition of changing media technologies (Athique, 2016, pp. 1-2). New information technology and global computer networking led the global society to become a form of a network society where dense flow of information occurs in increasingly interconnected global cities. According to Vertovec (2009, p. 7), cultural products including films have an aspect of transnationalism associated with a fluidity of styles, social institutions and everyday practices. In this context, transnationalism in media manifests through the blending of cultural phenomena. This can be observed in instances of "cultural borrowing," such as Hollywood adapting Japanese films (Athique, 2016, pp. 4-5). It is also evident in films tailored for multicultural and international audiences, exemplified by the widespread global popularity of Korean cinema in recent years. Moreover, the concept of "hybridity" plays a crucial role in understanding the transnational circulation of culture. It refers to the state of two relatively distinct forms, styles or identities from different national or cultural backgrounds are mixed together (Kraidy, 2005, p. 5). One of its examples is a global co-production of films: *Okja* (Joon-Ho, 2017) is directed and produced by people from South Korea while being financially funded by an American company for its production and premiered on Netflix, an American streaming service. The dialogues are in both English and Korean, featuring actors from various countries, including the U.S., Australia, Canada, South Korea, and the U.K. As media contents are becoming more globally distributed, the significance on considering "transnational audiences" with various national and ethnic identities of audiences have been increased. Katz and Liebes (1986, pp. 151-171) conducted the study about the interpretation of *Dallas* among audiences from different cultural backgrounds, which gave evidence to the Hall's theory (1980, pp. 128-138) that people from different backgrounds "decode" media texts using their own sense of national and ethnic identity, while a wide variety of audiences still understand what is depicted in the content without difficulty. Their findings also highlighted that people were far more "referential", reading the program as if it were the reality, than "critical", the awareness of the constructed nature of the program. Another large-scale audience reception study was

conducted by Barker and Mathijs (2008, pp. 153-155) on the interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*. This study follows a trend identified by Katz and Liebes (1986, pp. 151-171), where audiences clearly recognize the transnational and universal elements of the content but still incorporate their own experiences into the negotiation of its interpretation.

Bondebjerg (2020, p. 219) summarized the findings from these major audience reception studies into three patterns of how audiences engage with media narratives. The first pattern is "subjective encounters," where audiences interpret narratives based on their very personal experiences or events that mirror their own lives. The second pattern is "collective encounters," where audiences' reception is influenced by collective local, regional, national, or transnational patterns of recognition or collective societal and cultural identities. Finally, there are "universal cognitive, emotional screen encounters," where receptions are derived from the shared human bodily features, brains, and emotional systems.

When discussing the globalization of media texts, it is equally important to consider glocalization, standing for global entities adapting their offerings to align with the distinctive local attributes. The global cannot exist without the plurality of the local; therefore, globalization inherently involves glocalization (Beyer, 2007, p. 98). Globalization is not about homogenization or Americanization, as people from different cultures and societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently. Hence, the context of geography, history, and language must be deeply considered when studying globalization (Appadurai, 1996, p. 17). Tindi and Ayiku (2018, pp. 273-279) studied the Ghanaian reception of a Mexican telenovela telecast in a local Ghanaian language. Their research revealed that the representation of social issues and personal struggles, such as class discrimination, self-determination, and patience depicted in the show, influenced Ghanaian audiences' views on challenges they face in their everyday lives. One audience member began to see her lack of education as no impediment because the main character in the show became a successful fashion designer without formal education. This result demonstrates that the cultural influence of media content is so profound that it can shape new attitudes, beliefs, values, and ways of life among audiences. Although the culturally hybridized nature (foreign content broadcasted in a local language) of this content may have influenced audience interpretation, it remains valuable data on local interpretations of global media texts. In the context of Asian consumption of American films, Su (2017, pp. 528-531) studied the Chinese youth's interpretation on American films and found that the American independent films are inspiring and bring a positive influence on their

worldview, such as their opinions on life, love, marriage and humanity, by presenting the complexity of human society and social issues. Also importantly, she found that the values embedded in American films such as individualism, Eurocentrism, American exceptionalism, and associated political values of liberty, freedom and democracy, contrasting the Chinese ideology and social systems, led them to reconsider their own cultural identity, and aspire for a better way of living in moral sense, similar to the finding from Tindi and Ayiku (2018, pp. 273 - 279).

It is important to note that glocalization and hybridity, two significant components of globalization, operate within an unequal power balance rooted in colonial histories (Piot, 2001, pp. 85-91) and the privileged cultural resources that some countries possess over others (Anthias, 1999, pp. 121-141). This fact must be carefully considered when examining the background and process of transnational meaning-making in media and its implications.

### 3. Methods

To engage with Japanese film audiences' reception on feminist themes in *Promising Young Woman* and their broader societal attitudes towards gender, this project relies on a qualitative thematic analysis of online film reviews on the popular Japanese digital platform, Filmmarks. The qualitative approach is suitable here as it can help capture in-depth, localized and contextualized meaning-makings, in line with active audience theories. Furthermore, the thematic approach allows the researcher to sift through film reviews posted by ordinary audience members and identify patterns in how the public engages and interprets the feminist topics in the chosen film (Paris & Uyheng, 2023, pp. 2030-2032).

#### 3.1 Explanation and justification of the case

The chosen film for this project is *Promising Young Woman*, released in selected movie theatres in Tokyo and Osaka, Japan on July 9, 2021, and officially released in the nationwide Japan on July 16, 2021. Produced by the independent film-release division of Universal Pictures in Hollywood, *Promising Young Woman* has garnered numerous prestigious awards, including an Oscar. This film embodies elements of both the third wave (post-feminism) and the fourth wave of feminism. It tells a story of rape revenge, a theme that has sparked global debate, particularly in relation to the MeToo movement (Benson-Allott, 2021; Walker, 2021). The transnational trend of anger towards sexual violence, harassment, and patriarchal society seems to be a significant influence on the making of this film, which explains its connection to the fourth wave, a contemporary feminist trend that is greatly influenced by the growing presence of social media and the digital sphere, where "call-out" culture has been fueled (Munro, 2013, p. 23). The film's influence from the third wave (post-feminism) can be explained by *Promising Young Woman's* protagonist, Cassie's autonomous and individualistic feminist character: She is a doctoral degree drop-out woman working in a café, disguised in pastel pink, "pure" looking clothing, and in her "real" life, she seems to solely live for the purpose of exacting "revenge" for her best friend's suicide derived from rape and mistreatment. She does not try to challenge the structural issues behind what happened to her best friend, but rather, she acts solely for the sake of her revenge, which aligns with the individualistic characteristic of "post-feminist sensibility," argued by Gill (2007, pp. 148-164). Another main argument of this concept is that women claim their own sexual desire and try to conform to the beauty standard to become a desirable heterosexual subject while pleasing themselves for doing that at the same time. Such sexualization of their own bodies can also be

seen in this film. For example, when Cassie tries to seduce a man in order to “revenge” him, she dresses up in a sexy nurse costume, which has a perfect “male-gaze” maximizing effect.

Another important topic, intersectionality of feminism, which has been a continuing issue both in the third and fourth wave, can also be argued in relation to this film. Cassie is a Western White, middle- or upper-class heterosexual woman, which is consistent with Western media trends on framing and discussing feminism (Phillips, 2021, p. 82). Cassie’s boss at her coffee shop is the only non-White main character in this film and has no interiority, depicted stereotypically as the protagonist’s good friend. These portrayals of characters in the film have been criticized by some online articles writers including Horton (2021), Monteil (2021) and Oreck (2021). Furthermore, Cassie weaponizes and heavily relies on her White femininity marked by her thin, blonde and beautiful appearance that fits into a perfect “benchmark woman” (Deliovsky, 2008, pp. 49-58), which led the researcher, just like other online article writers, to wonder if the protagonist is able to seek for the revenge just because she is White. However, the empowering dimension of this racial privilege is not touched upon at all in the film; consequently, the film has been criticized for not taking an intersectional perspective on feminist issues (Monteil, 2021).

In Japan, the film was released in independent movie theatres or small-scale theatres (under 200 seats) (Masuda, 2015). Although it was released under the emergency state due to the Covid pandemic (i.e., movie theatres could only sell 50% of their seats), the film’s box-office revenue in Japan reached a 100 million yen (approx. 600K euro) after 49 days from its release (Suda, 2021). This amount is considered financially successful in the context of an independent, U.S. film in Japan. Furthermore, the film has led to online discussions on social media in Japan, with many users connecting it to topics such as feminism, sexual violence, and women’s issues. Major Japanese newspaper movies reviews also touched upon these topics (Yamada, 2011; Yanashita, 2021). Another Western film, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (Hittman, 2020), which touched upon similar topics, was released around the same time as *Promising Young Woman*. While these two films have often been compared (Akutsu, 2021; Kinejun Online, 2021), *Promising Young Woman* generated a bigger online discussion, making it a more ideal case for this research.

### **3.2 Sampling and data collection**

To capture the Japanese audience engagement with this film, this study uses the Japanese film reviews and database platform Filmmarks. Running since 2012, Filmmarks is one of the biggest film reviews and database website/mobile application in Japan, containing a database of films, TV series, animation from both international and domestic produced and distributed contents. As of May 4, 2024, *Promising Young Woman* had accumulated a total of 54,380 comments from unique users on the platform (while other film review platforms are also used in Japan, the number of comments on this film were significantly lower, i.e., 349 comments on Eiga.com as of May 4, 2024). In terms of its user base, Filmmarks is known as a platform used primarily by people in their 20s and 30s living in urban areas (personal conversation with Tsumiki. Inc. employee).

For this research, a total of 180 comments were sampled. First, the researcher downloaded the comments on this film in chronological order from the film release date in Japan (July 9, 2021) to the first film release date in the nationwide Japan (July 16, 2021) (a total of 477 comments). Focusing on early comments allowed her to understand the early reactions that may not have been greatly influenced by subsequent discussions or other users' reactions. From this batch of the first 477 comments, she drew a purposive sample in order to facilitate the in-depth, qualitative analysis. This was in line with methodological literature suggesting that qualitative researchers focus on cases with rich amount of information for the most effective use of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2016, p. 534). Such rich cases should engage consistently with the phenomenon under investigation. This advice has been informed by subsequent sampling process, where she has selected only comments that explicitly engaged with topics such as: feminism, patriarchy, women's oppression, sexual violence, and any current affairs related to these themes both derived from Japan and worldwide, such as the MeToo movement. She has worked chronologically, from the first comments posted, and constructed the purposive sample up to reaching a total of 180 comments. The resulting sample of N=180 thus covers the period July 9, 2021 to July 16, 2021. The comments and the date of posting were copy and pasted from the reviewing platform to a Word document, and each was assigned a number (e.g., 1, 2, 3 etc.). In the process of purposive sampling, she has excluded comments that were not in Japanese in order to make the analyzing process equal, and comments that were not directly discussing the topics related to the film and not aligning with the topic of the researcher's interests outlined above. Although the majority of users use "fake" names to stay anonymous, any user details that are available on the platform are not used for this research.

Importantly, an average word count of such comments is around 380 words in Japanese (based on the researcher's own pilot analysis of 20 early comments on this film). Japanese linguistic characters, however, can contain up to 2.04 times more information than English-language words (Yokohara, 1992, p. 62). Based on this, the researcher estimated that 380 Japanese words roughly translated into 780 English words; thus, a sample of N=180 comments with an average of 380 Japanese words would result in approx. 140,400 words in English (which is consistent with the methodological guidelines provided by Erasmus University Rotterdam for an in-depth analysis).

### **3.3 Thematic analysis**

Data was analyzed by means of thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 77-97). This method of analysis allows the researcher to discover important patterns in the data while being flexible. Data coding was conducted in an inductive/deductive manner: She had a theoretical starting point and was sensitized by various concepts, but the codes emerged by reading and re-reading the data. The digital software, Atlas.ti was used for data analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 86-93) outlined several stages that researchers must follow when doing thematic analysis: (1) the researcher familiarizes herself with the data and makes notes with a critical mindset, (2) the researcher codes interesting features of the data in a systematic way, (3) the researcher clusters the initial codes into potential themes, (4) the researcher checks if the themes created in the third step work in relation to coded extract, (5) the researcher defines and names the themes, and, finally, (6) the researcher writes the report by selecting data extracts to illustrate the themes and explaining how the themes relate them back to the research question and theoretical background. The researcher went back and forth through these stages, constantly updating and improving the codes and themes in relation to the data and the theoretical framework. In the first stage, with the theoretical discussions of feminism and transnational audiences outlined earlier, she read all through the data thoroughly. In the second stage, she focused on the two dimensions of this research: feminism and transnationality. When reading a comment, she coded separately instances where the text addressed either feminist or transnational dimensions, resulting in an initial set of codes. Some of these initial codes include: "Kawaii Carey Mulligan" (a code that captures recurrent commentary on actress Carey Mulligan's appearance as "kawaii" or cute), "Recognizing the connection between PYW and MeToo" (for text that explicitly linked *Promising Young Woman*

to the MeToo movement), and “PYW criticizes patriarchy” (for text that expresses finding of topics related to patriarchy in *Promising Young Woman* and its critical positionality to such topics). In the third stage, she clustered these large numbers of codes into potential themes. For example, “Recognizing the connection between PYW and MeToo” and “PYW criticizes patriarchy” were grouped together because they both show that the film criticizes and/or raises awareness of gender-related social issues. In the fifth stage, this group was named as “PYW depicts and/or raises question on feminism and women’s issues” as a theme. In the end, she found a relevance between several themes, and it became an overarching theme (The final coding tree can be found in Appendix).

### **3.4 Credibility of research and ethical considerations**

The quality of qualitative research is assessed in terms of its credibility. Two important aspects that influence research credibility are reliability and validity (Silverman, 2011, pp. 365-385). For the reliability, the researcher explained the process of this research including theoretical perspectives and methodology to make it transparent to other researchers. On a methodological level, with a relatively big size (N=180) of collected data, the use of software, Atlas.ai greatly helped the researcher interact with and systematically analyze the data, contributing to the reliability. Researchers’ reflexivity is considered an important aspect in qualitative research and also connected to the reliability, since it impacts its outcomes and how the research process is understood by researchers (Hardy et al., 2001, pp. 531-560). To make this process transparent, the researcher includes a brief initial description of her positionality in this project. She was born and raised in Japan, which gives her the cultural capital necessary for understanding the perspective of the film audience comments on the film, including knowledge of the trends and events in Japanese society that such comments may refer to. Given her immersion in Western academic culture, she is also aware of the various scholarly debates on Western (white) feminism. Additionally, she has working experience in marketing Western TV series and films for Japanese audiences, and in this role, she gained familiarity with the style and tone of film reviews. These backgrounds may also influence the analysis process, by preventing her from asking critical questions of things she takes for granted. Her initial assumptions about how Japanese audiences make sense of feminist topics portrayed in the Western feminist film were that they would connect this film to worldwide feminist movements such as MeToo and MeToo-derived women’s actions in Japan, such as the



case of Shiori Ito, and talk about their own experiences related to feminist topics depicted in the film and how awful the situation surrounding women is in Japan, while comparing it to the one in the West. Keeping track of these assumptions will enable her to reflect upon the impact of her own positionality in the analysis process.

Research validity refers to the extent to which the research accurately represents the social phenomenon it is aimed at (Silverman, 2011, p. 367). To raise the validity of this research, during the process of data analysis, the researcher used tools for validating qualitative studies explained by Silverman (2011, p. 367), which is to employ the analysis on the small number of data each time, making sure not to do the whole data analysis all at once. By doing this, the researcher was able to constantly compare and reflect upon the findings of the previous cycle with each new cycle/sample. Other strategy for raising the validity is a deviant-case analysis argued by Silverman (2011, pp. 378-379), a method that identifies and further analyzes an opinion that does not seem to have a relevance with the rest on a first glance. For example, although an opinion about bodily and personal attributes of Carey Mulligan was seen in a big number of comments, at first the researcher did not see its relevance with others. However, by looking at it in a macro view and seeing it as part of the whole texts, the researcher realized that there were two types of opinions in it: the first one is comments that acknowledge her personal reasons for the choice of outfits and look, which is connected to what happened to her in the past, a loss of her friend for a rape crime. The other comments do not mention such background and simply enjoy her visual as a commodity. Therefore, she was able to connect the first type of comment with others under an overarching group that politicizes feminist comments and the other one with a group that depoliticizes feminist comments.

Given the fact that this research uses personal comments that were posted on Filmmarks by film audiences in Japan, ethics is an important aspect to consider when conducting the analysis. Although Filmmarks is a public social media website and most users use fake names and not fully reveal their personal identity on their profiles, some of the comments contain personal stories from the users. The researcher anonymized the user information as much as possible by only collecting the comments and their posted dates, and any user information belonging to the comments were removed from the collection of data. To honor the originality of the comments, every word in the comments is translated properly from Japanese to English by the researcher without any modifications when referenced in this research paper. To make

the translation as original and nuanced as possible, some locally oriented words, such as “kawaii,” are used as they are. Japanese words that are difficult to find a direct translation in English are also used as they are, with an accompanying explanation in English. Only when contexts are missing in the comments, the researcher’s interpretation is added in brackets.

## 4. Results

Based on the theoretical framework, the researcher separated online discourse from people in Japan around feminist themes portrayed in *Promising Young Woman* analytically by looking for two topics: (A) *Engagement with feminist themes* and (B) *Transnational meaning-making of feminist themes*. From these two dimensions, a total of seven themes have been identified by the researcher. The first category (A) is divided into the themes of: (a) *(Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes*, (b) *(Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes*, (c) *Disaffirming feminist themes* and (d) *Reflecting feminist themes in everyday life*. The category (B) is divided into the themes of: (e) *Collectively engaging with feminist themes*, (f) *Personally engaging with feminist themes* and (g) *Emotionally engaging with feminist themes*. These themes did not exist as separate entities, but at times coexist. Quotes from the comments that are mentioned in each section have been translated by the researcher from Japanese to English.

The study aims to discover how film audiences in Japan perceive and engage with feminist themes in *Promising Young Woman*, and how these perceptions intersect with the representation and position of women in Japanese society in the context of feminism. The seven themes found through this analysis represent the different ways of the audiences' engagement with feminist themes in the film, as well as the factors and elements they recognize within this engagement.

### 4.1 Engagement with feminist themes

Following the findings of Paris and Uyheng (2023, p. 2041), many comments feature "feminist affirmations" and "cinematic politicizations." These trends often intersect; while affirming feminism and its themes in the film, some focus more on its political aspects, and others simply enjoy it as entertainment. Additionally, audiences interpret and assess these feminist themes based on their personal experiences, knowledge, or beliefs, aligning with Hall's argument (1980, pp. 128-138), which they reflect in their comments.

#### 4.1.1 *(Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes*

Audiences engage with the feminist themes depicted in *Promising Young Woman* in a politicized manner, linking what is portrayed in the film to broader feminist topics and

women's issues in society. Simultaneously, there is widespread affirmation of these portrayals. The comments listed in this section illustrate how audiences politicize feminist themes in the film.

A masterpiece that leaves a powerful message against sexual assault. (Comment 11)

A masterpiece that vividly depicts the liberation of women. (Comment 12)

It's old-fashioned to say "If the victim in this case were your daughter" when talking about the issue of misogyny, but it was also pleasurable to see the revenge against the principal of the school who puts it into practice. It was a powerful blow to the slaves of the patriarchy who trample "promising girls" with a straight face and forgive "promising boys". (Comment 41)

The first two comments express positive reception of the film's feminist message, describing it as a "masterpiece" for its impact on issues like "sexual assault" and the "liberation of women." Comment 41 suggests a direct link between the film's content and a patriarchal society, viewing it as a "powerful blow" to men and women (including the school principal character, who is a woman) who are taking advantage of such societal norms. This comment also finds pleasure in the film's depiction, aligning with Ang's argument that female audiences engage with media texts to find pleasure, and they find pleasure by gaining expressions to contest patriarchy and by being recognized and validated of their feelings (1982, pp. 130-136).

Some comments explicitly reference real incidents of sexual crimes and social phenomena like the MeToo movement to illustrate their connection to the themes depicted in the film:

I was reminded of the Stanford rape case while watching the film, and it seemed to be the inspiration. (Comment 71)

This film is a film that #MeToo has brought and supported. It is also no coincidence that it coincides with the Trump era. The Women's March started right after Trump's inauguration, the slapstick drama at the time of Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court (of the U.S.) ... (Comment 48)

As these comments imply, *Promising Young Woman* works as a mirror of the society for some audiences, and they perceive the political aspect of the film as it's a core of the film.

Additionally, a lot of comments acknowledge the entertainment aspects of the film, but state that they feel stronger connection to the feminism and societal aspects of the film.

In the Japanese trailer, it is touted as "revenge entertainment," but it is not merely a story of venting the frustrations of trauma. Instead, it captures the profound pain of sexual violence as a societal issue that goes beyond mere gender differences in awareness. Despite wavering between the possibilities of a different future, it is a powerful film that shakes viewers as it portrays those who could not "move on" because of the incident, standing up with unyielding determination. (Comment 78)

It is not just feminist revenge entertainment. In fact, the word "entertainment" is too light to describe it. There is absolutely no fault on the part of women who are raped!!!! (Comment 99)

Comment 78 describes how the film addresses sexual violence while subtly criticizing the Japanese version of its trailer for being misleading. The trailer fails to delve into the depth of the issues surrounding sexual violence and instead promotes the film as "revenge entertainment." Comment 99 also refers to the similar term "feminist revenge entertainment," possibly influenced by the Japanese trailer, similar to comment 78. The last sentence starting with "There is..." reflects rage likely sparked by the portrayal of Cassie's best friend, who was

blamed as a victim of rape in the film. Rage is an important emotion that often comes out from comments. These comments seem to highly regard the authenticity of the portrayal of social issues depicted in the film, as argued by Huang (2023, pp. 53-63) in the context of Chinese audiences' interpretation of Western feminist films.

Lastly, it's noteworthy to mention the discussions about Carey Mulligan's outfits in the film. Some audiences have interpreted the hidden meanings behind her choice of outfits.

This lovely yet painful fashion and the thick makeup applied as if to cover everything might have been her way of hiding her own suffering and struggles, never forgetting the past. It could have been an attempt to muster the courage to face her fears. (Comment 119)

Despite the female-empowerment premise of the rape-revenge genre, which is often consumed as (male-gaze) pornography, it was clear from Carey Mulligan's attire in the final scenes that this film serves as an antithesis to that genre. (Comment 136)

Comment 119 suggests that Carey Mulligan wears such outfits and puts on makeup to conceal "her own suffering and struggles." It can be inferred that this audience believes her attire serves as a shield to mask her true emotions. The phrase "never forgetting the past" implies that the audience perceives her outfits, which may seem juvenile for her age, as a way for her to remain connected to the time when her best friend, Nina, was still alive before taking her own life due to rape.

The second comment mentions that her outfits in the final scene, an iconic nurse costume, serve to challenge traditional rape-revenge films that often portray women through an eroticized lens influenced by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 6-18). These comments suggest that audiences find a political meaning in the choice of her outfits.

#### **4.1.2 (Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes**

Some audiences engage with the feminist themes portrayed in the film, not as its main subject, and in a depoliticized manner. This type of engagement is evident in comments where audiences express a stronger connection to the entertainment aspects of the film while still acknowledging its feminist and societal themes.

With the background of social issues, the film portrays a revenge drama in a pop style. Besides the story, there are many highlights, including the fashion, interiors, and music!  
(Comment 153)

This film is often discussed in terms of feminism and gender issues because it is based on a rape incident, the deep emotional wounds of women, and a desire for revenge against misogynistic men. However, that's not quite the point. In a good way, I think it's a trashy B-movie. The highlight is how the protagonist, played by Carey Mulligan, goes mad. Her madness reflects her sadness and anger. (Comment 13)

Both comments acknowledge the social issues or feminist topics addressed in the film but primarily view them as elements of entertainment. Comment 13 explicitly states that these themes are "not quite the point," characterizing the film as a "trashy B-movie" that emphasizes Carey Mulligan's descent into madness. In this comment, the revenge aspect of the film is emphasized and seen purely as entertainment, while the underlying reasons for her actions, linked to feminist themes such as rape culture, misogyny, and patriarchy, are portrayed as disconnected from her act.

The film could have been entirely serious, but by making it colorful and pop, it has a strong entertainment feel. The story has several twists and turns, making the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay well-deserved. It's a film that gives women the courage to realize they shouldn't have to endure things as a matter of course. Carey Mulligan is amazing as always! (Comment 42)

This comment predominantly emphasizes the entertainment aspect of the film rather than its societal implications. However, the sentence starting with "It's a film that..." does express a sense of feminist affirmation. This illustrates that cinematically depoliticizing comments do not always take a negative stance towards feminism, echoing the findings of Paris and Uyheng (2023, p. 2041). The trends of cinematic politicization and affirming feminism are intricately intertwined, reflecting the complexities of post-feminist sensibility as argued by Gill (2007, pp. 148-164), which acknowledges that interpretations of feminism in media can vary among feminists.

The phenomenon of depoliticizing feminist themes can also be observed in comments discussing Carey Mulligan's appearance and personality. While most audiences positively perceive her performance, comments focusing on her appearance suggest that some view her presence merely as part of the entertainment commodity, rather than recognizing her role in conveying the important feminist themes of the film.

Of course, Carey Mulligan is as visual delight as usual, looking great in both innocent and slutty looks. The nurse outfit is fantastic! This is my pick for this year's Halloween!  
(Comment 92)

Carey Mulligan's fashion, hairstyles, and makeup were all incredibly kawaii, and seeing her in various looks was a visual delight. Her dress on the first date was especially adorable and suited her perfectly. (Comment 117)

Both comments describe Carey Mulligan as a "visual delight" ("me no hoyo" in Japanese). In the Japanese context, this term often implies viewing a visually appealing subject as a commodity, detached from their personal background. This nuance is evident in comment 92, which refers to her nurse outfit as their "pick for this year's Halloween." Additionally, the term "slutty" ("bicchi" in Japanese, derived from the English "bitch" but closer in meaning to "slutty") appears not only in comment 92 but also in several others. This usage reflects the complex relationship with post-feminist ideals of self-empowerment, where becoming sexually autonomous and active can risk receiving slut-shaming (Riley, 2017, pp. 10-11). While these



comments use "slutty" positively to describe Carey's visual attractiveness, it raises questions about how such perceptions might differ in real-life scenarios. Nevertheless, these comments illustrate that also in Japan, post-feminist ideals of a "sexual connoisseur" appearance can be linked to perceptions of "sluttiness."

As used in comment 117, "kawaii" is the term most frequently used to describe her appearance. According to Kinsella (1995, pp. 220-221), "kawaii" refers to a concept of "childlike" cuteness that celebrates qualities such as "sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances." It is a widely beloved term in modern Japanese society. Research from the early 1990s indicates that 71% of young people aged 18 to 30 in Japan either liked or loved individuals with a "kawaii" appearance, while 55.8% appreciated "kawaii" attitudes and behaviors. The following comments provide further insight into why this term was chosen to describe her appearance.

After all, it's Carey Mulligan. At times, she looks like a worn-out, middle-aged alcoholic woman, yet she can also smile with a delicate beauty reminiscent of a primrose, appearing youthful, fragile, and evoking a desire to protect her. (Comment 82)

For me, Carey Mulligan has always had the image of a girl from "The Great Gatsby" or "Drive"—a kawaii girl that makes men want to do something for her because of her charm. (Comment 91)

Until now, Carey Mulligan has often given the impression of playing weak women or secondary characters to male protagonists. However, in this film, she has significantly expanded her acting range. I never imagined she could so powerfully portray such a bold and audacious woman. (Comment 101)

Comments 82 and 91 describe how Carey Mulligan's appearance evokes a desire among men to "protect" or "do something" for her. In comment 82, her appearance is described with

terms like “youthful” and “fragile,” which aligns with Kinsella's definition of "kawaii." Comment 101 suggests that her previous acting roles have portrayed her as "weak," surprising audiences with her portrayal as a "bold and audacious" woman in this film. Arima's study (2003, p. 88) indicates that women's gender identity is often commodified in Japanese television commercials, emphasizing youth and beauty through a sexist male gaze. This suggests that Japanese audiences may be accustomed to seeing young, beautiful women portrayed as commodities in media, a characteristic that Carey Mulligan's "kawaii" charm embodies.

My first thought upon seeing Carey Mulligan's initial shot was simply, "She looks older now..." That being said, her acting skills remain as strong as ever. (Comment 101)

Despite her delicate, blonde, doll-like face, her wrinkles were quite noticeable in certain expressions, making me wonder how old she was at first. However, I thought this added to the mysterious feel of the character, which was great. (Comment 145)

Comment 101 appears disappointed with Carey Mulligan's appearance, noting "She looks older now..." ("fuketa na..."), which conveys a sense of letdown in Japanese. "Fuketa" is typically used negatively to suggest someone no longer looks as attractive due to age. Comment 145, provided by a female audience member (as indicated elsewhere in the comment), discusses noticeable wrinkles, indicating her dissatisfaction with Carey's appearance not meeting the perceived standard of a “delicate, blonde, doll-like” face. This reaction aligns with a post-feminist sensibility as argued by Gill (2007, pp. 148-164), where women engage in self-monitoring and critique of other women's appearance against societal beauty standards to appear desirable. These comments suggest that in Japan, the prevailing beauty standard emphasizes kawaii and youthful appearance, and women may feel pressured to conform to these ideals to survive in a patriarchal society.

#### **4.1.3 Disaffirming feminist themes**

Although it is quite a minor opinion within the samples, there are some comments that

clearly state their negative perspectives on feminist portrayal in the film. One comment, for instance, suggests that the audience enjoys the film precisely because they feel feminist themes are not prominently emphasized.

At first, I thought, "Oh, this might be more of a feminist film than I expected, maybe it's not for me," but the story turned out to be quite a thrilling revenge drama, so I enjoyed it. It was nice that Cassie wasn't particularly trying to change the world's discrimination but was driven by personal vengeance, which made it quite easy to watch. (Comment 24)

It can be assumed that those making such comments either prefer to view films purely for entertainment, disconnected from societal issues, or they are anti-political or anti-feminist so that any portrayal that goes against their beliefs makes them feel uncomfortable.

Since *Bombshell*, I've started to feel a bit overwhelmed by films that tackle social issues. Both *Bombshell* and *Aristocrats* were interesting and well-made, but the heaviness overshadowed them for me. Instead, I personally want to support films like *Long Shot*, *The High Note*, and *Promising Young Woman*, which address issues while delivering fictional retribution. I fully understand that my perspective is influenced by my social background. (Comment 57)

This comment shares a similar tone to the previous comment, but it compares *Promising Young Woman* with other films like *Bombshell* (Roach, 2019) and *Aristocrats* (Sode, 2021), which portray women's lives in patriarchal societies. It suggests that these two films are heavier (assumingly in a political sense) than *Promising Young Woman* and similar films, which are more fictionalized and easier to consume. The final sentence, suggesting that the audience's societal backgrounds influence how they interpret the film, aligns with Morley's argument (1980, pp. 266-279) that factors like class, age, gender, and race impact the audience's interpretation of media texts. The commenter does not specify their own social

class or background, but this perspective adds an important dimension to the analysis of audience discourse surrounding feminist themes.

#### **4.1.4 Reflecting feminist themes in everyday lives**

Feminist themes and women's issues depicted in the film prompt audiences to talk about their own perceptions on these topics. The audiences relate them to their everyday lives, and mainly talk about their perceptions on women and their positionality in society.

Everywhere Cassie goes, she is bombarded with ugly and condescending words from men. They act this way because they see her as weaker and unlikely to fight back.

(Comment 1)

This comment analyzes Cassie's situation and the men around her through the lens of the audience's own experiences or knowledge. Drawing on their prior experience or knowledge, they perceive women as weaker than men, often not being able to fight against men's awful behaviors.

"Of course. Don't underestimate us. Don't be so shameless. You're seriously *kuzu*. Suffer more." I'm sure all women feel the same way I do. (Comment 51)

All those guys saying "I was just a kid back then" are such *kuso* men. Seriously, they're *kuso* men. They're just trying to run away from the crimes they committed. Only *kuso* men appear in this film! (Except for a father) (Comment 145)

Many comments like these two, referring to men as "kuzu," "kuso" (which translates to "shit," in English) or other degrading terms, have been seen in collected data. Most audiences that have commented such terms seem to be women; by analyzing their comments and the way they write sentences. These are the examples of showing women's rage against men in a

very direct way, but this rage can also be observed indirectly or subtly in many other comments.

Every time I hear about such incidents in the news, I feel a fear in a real sense that "I could be a victim too." Unfortunately, I've had many experiences where I wasn't treated as a person with a soul just because I'm a woman. That's what it means to live as a woman in this crappy society. Honestly, it makes me want to kill them. Is this hell?  
(Comment 74)

Comment 74 does not directly mention the word "men," but the term "them" used in the sentence starting from "Honestly" can be assumed that she refers to men. This indirect reference indicates that the woman who wrote it has a great anger towards men that cause difficulties for her as a woman in society.

The discussion of sexual crimes and rape culture, central themes of the film, has been frequently raised by the audience, as seen in the next comments.

"It's the victim's fault for getting drunk," "It's the victim's fault for wearing a short skirt."

No way. In cases of sexual violence, the perpetrator is always at fault. (Comment 19)

I've heard of accusations like "It's your fault for being drunk," "It's because you're dressed indecently," or "You're the one who made them misunderstand," on them (women) who experience sexual assault, like hundreds of times. This film skillfully weaves in the issue of so-called "slut-shaming" while presenting a brilliant thriller script.  
(Comment 72)

Many audiences brought up "slut-shaming" issues within rape culture. Examples of accusations listed by them sounds all very familiar to the researcher who was born and grew

up in Japan and has encountered them in direct conversations and through media.

These discourses about sexual crimes and rape culture portray woman as subjects that are oppressed and in a weaker position than men. However, quite a large number of audiences commented that it is not a one-sided (male vs female) problem, but rather, both male and female cause problems. Given the substantial number of comments, this topic is worth analyzing.

As a woman, I'm not always seeing things from a 100% victim's perspective. Of course, it's awkward and uncomfortable. Forgetting, abandoning others for self-preservation, and pretending not to know, these actions aren't just for villains in fiction. (Comment 9)

Regarding gender, contrary to the goal of achieving gender equality, there are still a number of women like her (Cassie's classmate from university) in the film, women whose lives and worldviews are idealized and fixed with a male gaze in a male dominated society that has existed since probably the time she was born. It's disheartening. (Comment 102)

Both comments mention that women can oppress other women in society. The audience member in comment 9 reflects on herself as a woman who can also be a perpetrator. Both comments are triggered by the story and characters in the film, and the second one explicitly mentions a character who is Cassie's classmate from university. This character was at the party where Cassie's best friend was raped, knew what happened, but kept silent about it, blaming the victim.

Although these comments do not directly mention if a society that allows these problems to occur is a Japanese society, but it is easy to assume so. Sode, a Japanese female director that shot *Aristocrats*, a story about women living in a patriarchal society in Japan, described that older women who have lived in a stricter patriarchal environment have been taught to prioritize supporting men and maintaining the household as the ideal societal structure. These women have endured oppressive environments, often passing these

expectations onto younger generations (Oku, 2021). Based on the researcher's personal experience, this explanation sounds convincing, and it is also true that there are young generation that tend to follow acts and attitudes derived from older generations. It is possible to argue that Japanese patriarchal society influences not only how men but also how women think and behave towards each other, perpetuating cycles of oppression similar to those depicted in the film set in the Western context (the U.S.).

There are also other comments worth analyzing regarding how women are described as powerful subjects with agency.

Even women will sleep with someone if they want to. (Comment 43)

Wearing revealing clothing is not a sexual appeal to men. (Comment 81)

If men don't stop looking down on women, women have no choice but to stand up for themselves in the ways they can. (Comment 1)

The comments in 43 and 81 express female agency that aligns with arguments made by Gill (2007, pp. 148-164) regarding post-feminist sensibility, particularly concerning bodily ownership and sexual desire. Comment 1 emphasizes the need for solidarity among women to combat men's aggression towards women and patriarchal societal norms. Analyzing these comments demonstrates that the post-feminist ideology, predominantly discussed in the West, can also be applied to a Japanese context.

#### **4.2 Transnational meaning-making of feminist themes**

When audiences engage with the feminist themes portrayed in the film, they often compare the situations depicted (in the U.S. or the West) with those in Japan. Additionally, they seem to be personally or emotionally influenced by these portrayals. To analyze these types of comments, the three patterns of transnational audience reception argued by

Bondebjerg (2020, p. 219) are applied: “collective encounters,” and “subjective encounters,” and “universal cognitive, emotional screen encounters.”

#### **4.2.1 Collectively engaging with feminist themes**

The feminist themes in the film prompt audiences in Japan to reflect on their own surroundings and what they have heard from others or through media in Japan. The comments introduced in this section can be categorized as “collective encounters” (Bondebjerg, 2020, p. 219), which involve interpreting media texts through collective local, regional, national, or transnational patterns of recognition, or through collective societal and cultural identities. The audiences' collective national recognition is evident in their references to aspects specifically related to Japan or the societal and cultural identities of people living in Japan.

A darkly humorous revenge thriller filled with social satire that resonates with Japanese society as well. In Japan, rape cases are frequently reported, but in the comment sections of news articles, you still often see disheartening comments like "It's her fault for going to the hotel" or "It's her fault for getting drunk." (Comment 50)

A woman who tried to stop a groping incident on the Midosuji Line was dragged around and raped by the two perpetrators. They were only sentenced to three years and six months because they were considered "young men with promising futures." You might also remember the case of *Kanojyo ha atama ga warui kara* (a book name, translated as “Because She’s Stupid” in English), based on an incident involving several University of Tokyo students. Or the scandal at Tokyo Medical University, where female applicants' scores were unfairly manipulated and lowered. Before dismissing this as mere misogyny or misandry, consider how the heinous and selfish actions of "promising young men" have repeatedly destroyed the futures of numerous "promising young women." (Of course, it goes without saying that the term "promising" here is used sarcastically.) (Comment 60)



Both comments highlight the audiences' reflections on feminist issues in Japan and how those issues are portrayed in the film. Comment 60 references actual incidents and crime cases in Japan to express the similarity of the situations. In particular, the rape crime involving University of Tokyo students (Fenton, 2016), which garnered significant public attention in Japan, shares many similarities with the rape case depicted in the film: the perpetrators received minimal punishment, and there was widespread backlash against the victims in the Japanese media.

The following comment also sees a connection between the feminist themes in the film and cases in Japan, but it is expressed with a sense of surprise:

But you see, being drunk doesn't automatically mean it's okay for someone to take you home without your consent or to assume you're agreeing to have sex. I thought there would be more of these issues in Japan than in the US, so it's surprising. I thought the U.S. would be more advanced in terms of gender equality and less likely to have male chauvinism. But it's really prevalent there. It's kind of shocking. (Comment 145)

The perception of the U.S. (or the West) as being advanced in terms of gender equality and women's positionality contrasts with the reality in Japan, which lags behind other countries. This may be connected to the reality of its situation in Japan that is behind the other countries, as Global Gender Gap Index 2023 (Pal et al., 2023, p. 11) shows that Japan ranks on the 125<sup>th</sup> among the entire 146 countries. This disparity is also evident in the comparatively muted reaction and impact of the MeToo movement in Japan (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019, p. 98; Donohue, 2020, pp. 72-79). However, it is important to approach the analysis of such comments with caution, considering the structural colonialism (Piot, 2001, pp. 86-91) and the privilege some countries hold over others (Anthias, 1999, pp. 121-141). People in Japan generally hold a positive view of the U.S. and the West, and a phenomenon of White worship is deeply ingrained in their society. This is evident in various media, such as television commercials where White people frequently appear (Hagiwara, 2004, p. 6) and clothing advertisements dominated by White models (Hagiwara, 2004, p. 7). This tendency is deeply connected to a Japan's Europeanization policy that has been started by Meiji government in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to raise Japan's global presence (Ishii, 1998, p. 40). Therefore, it is fair to

understand that the interpretation by the audiences in Japan of Western feminist films could be biased due to the historical context of the relationship between Japan and the U.S. (the West).

Cassie's "revenge" is indeed an act that further wounds her, but for someone whose time has stood still, it seems to be her only form of atonement. Her regretful lament of "not being able to do anything" at that moment resonates with me and with others around the world who have been similarly hurt. (Comment 142)

The expressions of belittling women that pop up intermittently made me want to quit the game, but well, that's just the kind of world it is, I guess. (Comment 118)

Comments 142 and 118 exemplify those that mention the universality of the issues surrounding women portrayed in the film, transcending its resonance with Japan's situation.

Audiences also express a desire to share the film with others, believing it can influence people regardless of gender, as the following comments demonstrate. Their transnational interpretations of the feminist topics discussed in this section seem to shape their perceptions of the film's potential impact.

The impact of watching this movie is probably intense, whether you're a man or a woman. ... Everyone has likely been on the side of the perpetrator, even if only for a moment and to varying degrees. That's why everyone should watch it. (Comment 33)

This is something everyone should see. It should be screened at college entrance ceremonies or coming-of-age ceremonies. (Comment 6)

Since this happens regularly in Japan as well, it's such an important film that it should be

shown in ethics classes. (Comment 47)

As comment 6 and 47 describe, many audiences mention that they want to share the film with young people who are around the age of high school or university students. This may stem from the fact that many sexual assaults are committed by individuals in these age groups and older. The belief that *Promising Young Woman*, made in the U.S. (the West), can make an impact on Japanese people is likely connected to their perception that feminist issues are transnational.

Although it's a minor opinion, some audiences seem to differentiate the feminist topics portrayed in the film from those in Japan. The following two comments explicitly mention the differences that audiences recognize in the issues related to the oppression of women between Japan and other countries.

Japan is lagging behind other countries in terms of sex education, so I think it's important to increase the time dedicated to learning about it. (Comment 84)

In the United States, many women's issues stem from the fact that those in power, typically men, have historically held the upper hand, often suppressing women's claims regardless of their validity. This presents a different dimension and complexity compared to the gender issues in Japan or South Korea, which are rooted in traditional values like the patriarchal family system. (Comment 45)

Comment 84 describes Japan's inferior situation in terms of sex education compared to other countries, although it does not specify which countries or regions. Comment 45 explains that women's issues in Japan (and South Korea) and the U.S. are on different dimensions. While patriarchy exists in both societies, the historical backgrounds are indeed different. In East Asia, it stems from a Confucian heritage (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 145-154). In the West, it appears to originate from the ownership of private property, where men seek to maintain power to pass on their property rights to their children. In this process of establishing their

rights, women's everyday lifestyles have to be restricted (Sultana, 2012, pp. 3-4).

#### **4.2.2 Personally engaging with feminist themes**

Feminist themes in the film influence audience on a personal level. These comments can be categorized as "subjective encounters," (Bondebjerg, 2020, p.219) where audiences interpret media texts based on personal experiences. They reflect on their own behaviors and thoughts related to gender topics or contemplate making changes.

I need to ask myself if I have also perpetuated. (Comment 6)

Because it was in the past. Because they were kids at the time. Because now they are gentlemen. Can these reasons absolve them (misconduct related to gender topics)? It depends on the crime. I, too, reflect on my past mistakes. (Comment 20)

Comments like these two, where audiences question their own past misconduct regarding feminist themes from the film, are widely observed. These comments illustrate how audiences interpret media by relating themes depicted in the film to their own lives. The feminist themes in the film prompt audiences to reflect on personal stories and experiences related to women's issues.

Women who have experienced sexual assault must be perfectly clean and honest. Women who dress provocatively or get drunk have only themselves to blame. I am ashamed to admit that I used to hold such beliefs. This shocking film completely overturned such mindset. (Comment 141)

I may have had an unconscious desire to arrogantly judge "something" based on the appearance of female victims, likely whether the victim was beautiful or sexy. Watching

this film made me realize how often I have been startled by my own unconscious discrimination like this. (Comment 41)

These comments highlight the direct influence of the film on audiences' mindsets. Comment 141 mentions a change in mindset regarding complicity in rape culture through victim-blaming, and the comment 41 most likely talks about the same thing. These insights suggest that watching *Promising Young Woman* prompts some viewers not only to reflect on personal experiences but also to alter their behaviors or acknowledge wrongdoing in contributing to the oppression of women in their society. This finding aligns with studies by Tindi and Ayiku (2018, pp. 273-279) and Su (2017, pp. 528-531), which emphasize how media texts can shape new attitudes, beliefs, and values among audiences.

#### **4.2.3 Emotionally engaging with feminist themes**

Audiences experience a range of emotions in response to the feminist themes portrayed in the film. This reaction aligns with “universal cognitive, emotional screen encounters,” (Bondebjerg, 2020, p.219) where the shared human experience influences how individuals interpret media texts. Many comments express strong sympathy with the film's revenge plot:

The film is filled with despicable characters who, when they become victims, have the audacity to cry. Don't cry when you hurt others without a second thought. I couldn't help but think, “you deserve even worse (revenge).” (Comment 14)

Realistically, there's the issue of whether a woman can face a man's strength without a weapon. However, it's incredibly satisfying to see justice served to men who, while pretending to be harmless, are actually looking for any opportunity to take advantage. These men don't listen to women and only think with their lower bodies, not even bothering to remember the woman's job, hobbies, or name. (Comment 16)

These comments reflect a despising feeling towards male characters who attempt to sexually abuse women. These emotions appear to generate sympathy and satisfaction, as evidenced by the comment “incredibly satisfying to see justice served to men,” regarding Cassie's revenge actions against them.

Other comments express emotions such as anger and sadness over the harsh reality surrounding women:

I wept with anger. To those watching, never forget that this is a reality happening around us. (Comment 176)

(These are) the reason I loathed men during my teenage years. An overwhelming anger at society's injustices, a frustration that the right things often don't prevail, and a relentless fury burning within me. (Comment 55)

While it's a revenge story, it adheres to the rules of reality, making it more piercingly painful than cathartic. The people she seeks revenge against aren't exaggerated villains; they're the kind of people you'd encounter in real life. Tragically, incidents like these aren't uncommon. Victims' voices being silenced and them experiencing secondary victimization is an all too frequent occurrence, which leaves you with a heavy heart. (Comment 74)

As these comments describe, audiences perceive the film's depiction as a reflection of reality in their own environment. They find the plot relevant to their everyday lives and surroundings, which evokes strong emotional responses.

## 5. Conclusion

To study contemporary discourses among people in Japan regarding their interpretations of feminism, women's representation, and societal positions as depicted in the American film *Promising Young Woman*, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of audience comments from the largest Japanese film review website, Filmmarks. The film intersects with two significant trends in contemporary feminist discourse: the third wave (post-feminism) and the fourth wave. *Promising Young Woman* narrates a fictional story of rape revenge but resonates globally due to its connections with the MeToo movement and its realistic portrayal of women's oppression (Benson-Allott, 2021; Walker, 2021), thus aligning with fourth wave feminism. This wave is notably shaped by the growing presence of social media and digital sphere with a rising "call-out" culture activism, as seen in the digitally empowered activism like the MeToo (Munro, 2013, p. 23). The influence of the third wave or post-feminism can be observed through the character of Cassie, the protagonist, who embodies individualistic traits in seeking revenge and being an autonomous subject achieving what she wants by navigating within the male gaze, concepts explored by Gill (2007, pp. 148-164) under post-feminist sensibility. Cassie represents a Western (white), likely middle- or upper-class feminist, aligning with the dominant representation of feminists in the contemporary feminist discourse and media representation (Phillips, 2021, p. 82). Given the predominant focus of feminist discourses and movements on Western contexts, this study aims to explore Japanese perspectives, addressing a critical gap in current research.

This study was based on and analyzed from theoretical standpoints of feminism (post-feminism) and transnational (and active) audience. The researcher identified seven overarching themes in the dimensions of engagement with feminist themes and transnational meaning-making of feminist themes. For the engagement with feminist themes, the themes were: (a) *(Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes*, (b) *(Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes*, (c) *Disaffirming feminist themes* and (d) *Reflecting feminist themes in everyday life*. For the transnational meaning-making of feminist themes, the themes were: (e) *Collectively engaging with feminist themes* (f) *Personally engaging with feminist themes* and (g) *Emotionally engaging with feminist themes*.

Overall, the results revealed that while audiences engage with feminist themes, the way they engage varies, which supports the active audience theory explaining that audiences actively engage with media texts and interpret them differently based on their experiences and

knowledge (Hall, 1980, pp. 128-138; Morley, 1994, pp. 255-261). Regarding engagement with feminist themes, consistent with the findings of Paris and Uyheng (2023, p. 2041), trends of “feminist affirmations” and “cinematic politicization” were widely observed in comments, and these trends intersected with each other. Feminist themes and women’s issues portrayed in the film were generally positively perceived and raised political awareness among audiences, categorized as: (a) *(Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes*. In the comments, feelings of “pleasure” were often found, aligning with Ang's findings (1982, pp. 130-136). These audiences appeared to derive pleasure from being able to express their opposition to patriarchy and feeling validated in those sentiments. On the other hand, a political perspective was sometimes disassociated from the feminist themes, possibly reflecting apolitical audiences or those who view the film purely as entertainment, as seen in: (b) *(Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes*. Negative engagement with feminist themes in the film was also observed in comments, although it was a minority opinion, categorized as: (c) *Disaffirming feminist themes*. By analyzing such engagement, the researcher has found that audiences tend to reflect their lives and surroundings through the feminist themes portrayed in the film. This analysis has helped her exploring their perspectives on women’s representation and their societal position in Japanese society. The majority of these comments are categorized as: (d) *Reflecting feminist themes in everyday life*. However, such trends are also evident in comments regarding Carey Mulligan’s appearance and personal attributes, falling under categories (a) *(Affirming and) politicizing feminist themes* and (b) *(Affirming and) depoliticizing feminist themes*.

Discourses about her appearance and personality reveal that her attributes, particularly from the pre- *Promising Young Woman* era, align with a Japan’s beauty standard and what is most favored for women, “kawaii.” (Kinsella, 1995, pp. 220-221). While audiences mostly perceive this positively, some of these perceptions seem connected to ideas about the representation and positionality of women in Japan shared in the comments. For instance, women are often seen as “young and fragile,” desirable subjects for men who require protection. Another prevalent discourse among audiences is the portrayal of women as weaker subjects than men and their suffering from sexual crimes and rape culture. Many of these discussions are infused with a strong sense of rage from women (judged based on their comments) against men. This rage can be associated with the call-out culture of the fourth wave. The rapid growth of digital spaces and social media has provided a platform for women to raise their voices, exposing and contesting those who have oppressed them, including through sexual abuse. Thus, this reflects a significant influence from the fourth wave in



Japanese society. The other discourse that emerges is the recognition that not only men but also women contribute to the oppression of women. These discussions may mirror Japanese patriarchal society, where feminist movements are relatively stagnant, leading not only men but also women to become complicit in maintaining oppressive structures in order to survive.

An important aspect of the discourse about women is the portrayal of women as powerful subjects with agency, aligning with trends from the third wave or the so-called “post-feminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007, pp. 148-164). Post-feminism can also be discussed in relation to the significant number of comments about Carey Mulligan’s appearance. She is positively perceived when audiences believe her appearance aligns with Japan’s beauty standard of “kawaii,” but negatively perceived when they feel she looks older and deviates from her previous youthful image. These discussions indicate that lookism, judging people based on appearance (Jones & Seet, 2023, p. 364), is ingrained in Japanese society. Many of the audience members who comment on her appearance also affirm feminist themes in the film. Based on this information, it can be assumed that some feminists in Japan highly value the country’s beauty standards for women. The self-monitoring aspect of post-feminist beauty trends discussed by Gill (2007, pp. 148-164) also appears relevant in the context of Japanese society.

On the transnational dimension, regardless of the type of engagement (collective, personal, or emotional) audiences have with media texts, they tend to be more referential than critical about the portrayal of feminist topics in the film, viewing those portrayals as realistic and applicable in Japan, and sometimes universally. This finding aligns with what Katz and Liebes (1986, pp. 151-171) argued regarding audiences’ engagement with media texts. Additionally, audiences understand the universal and transnational elements of the feminist themes but also incorporate their knowledge and experiences gained in Japan (their surroundings) into their interpretation, as discussed by Barker and Mathijs (2008, pp. 153-155). At the collective level of engagement, it was observed that many audiences believe or find, through watching the film, that Japan and the West (the U.S.) share the same or similar feminist issues, and people struggle in comparable ways. However, some audiences perceive a progressive West while viewing Japan’s feminism as rooted in its unique background. Such perceptions are likely influenced by Japan’s stagnant situation regarding feminism but also by biased perceptions assuming the West (the U.S.) to be superior, influenced by a structural unequal power balance stemming from colonialism (Piot, 2001, pp. 85-91) and the privileges

Western countries hold over others (Anthias, 1999, pp. 121-141). Audiences also feel personally influenced by feminist topics in the film, reflecting on their own misconduct and biases regarding them; some even decide to change their attitudes or behaviors, similar to findings by Tindi and Ayiku (2018, pp. 273-279), who argue that media contents shape new attitudes, beliefs, values, and ways of life among audiences. Emotional engagement with feminist topics is evident among audiences, who express sympathy, sadness, or anger. Previous studies have argued that audiences' "embeddedness" in Western post-feminist culture helps them relate to post-feminist themes in films (Huang, 2023, pp. 53-63). The results of this transnational meaning-making reveal that the majority of audiences in Japan can relate to feminist topics in Western feminist films. One potential reason for this could be the influence of Western culture on Japan and Japanese people, stemming from the Europeanization policy that began in the 19th century (Ishii, 1998, p. 40). Another reason might be that the audience for *Promising Young Woman* consists of individuals particularly interested in or familiar with Western post-feminist culture, considering that Western films have seen declining popularity in recent years and are not as commercially successful as domestic films in Japan (Schilling, 2023).

Martin and other researchers (2007) define activism as "everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks or power dynamics" (p. 79), suggesting that even small individual engagements within one's community can lead to broader societal changes (p. 81). In the context of this argument, commenting on feminist topics or women's issues on digital platforms makes audiences active participants in feminist activism. These small actions can potentially influence others. The analysis of audience comments in this paper regarding the politicization and depoliticization of feminist themes shows that the majority of audiences actively engage with these themes politically. In Japan, a collective society where individuals often feel pressure from standing out by doing something different or making different opinions than others, the MeToo movement was not so impactful compared to how it was in other countries (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019, p. 98; Donohue, 2020, pp. 72-79). However, platforms like Filmarks provide anonymity, allowing users to freely express their thoughts, which is similar to the appeal of Twitter for Japanese users (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2020, p. 554). This anonymity encourages engagement without fear of negative consequences, fostering a space where individuals can challenge patriarchy. The success of movements like the KuToo also underscores this point. While Filmarks lacks the extensive functionalities and recognition of platforms like Twitter for discussions and political movements, it nonetheless serves as a

digital space in Japan where people can contest patriarchy openly and safely due to its anonymous nature.

An interesting point the researcher noticed is the absence of comments criticizing the film for its lack of depiction of White privilege that Cassie has, which is a major criticism in Western media (Horton, 2021; Monteil, 2021; Oreck, 2021). A prevalent myth among many Japanese people is that Japan is an ethnically homogeneous country, despite the reality that the country is home to communities of Koreans who have lived there for three to four generations (Nagayoshi, 2016, p. 93), as well as Chinese, Brazilians, and others of diverse backgrounds. Drawing from personal experience, the researcher only became aware of being "racially Japanese and Asian" and the perceived "racial inferiority" of Japanese/Asian ethnicity in relation to a White majority after living abroad in Western countries like Australia and the Netherlands. In Japan, many racially Japanese individuals seldom consider their own race or contemplate what it means to be Japanese and Asian within their society. This lack of introspection is reflective of the limitations of feminism in Japan, where discussions on intersectionality, such as race and sexuality, have not gained significant attention (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 156-163).

### **5.1 Limitations and future research**

There are several limitations in this research that could be addressed and expanded upon in future studies. Firstly, the data sample used for this research consists of early reviews of the film, capturing discourses raised only within the selected period and not before or after. As history shows, the landscape surrounding feminism and feminist movements continues to evolve, as do people's reactions to them. Therefore, analyzing comments from different time periods could yield different results. Future researchers could explore more recent feminist-related discussions and interpretations by analyzing comments from more recent periods.

Secondly, this research collected data from Filmarks, where users seldom engage with others to discuss films. By contrast, platforms like Twitter or YouTube serve as community forums where users actively interact with each other's posts and comments. Analyzing data from these platforms could offer insights into how each discourse evolves into discussions. This approach has the potential to yield more nuanced and interesting results.

Additionally, as stated in the previous section of conclusion, the majority of audiences

can relate to the feminist themes depicted in the film. The interpretation of audiences in Japan on feminist themes in the Western film is possibly influenced due to the Japan's Europeanization history (Ishii, 1998, p. 40) and White worship or general positive attitudes among Japanese people towards White people and culture (Bonnett, 2000, pp. 92-93). It could be also the case that these audiences are the group that is especially interested in or familiar with Western culture. In order to better understand how embeddedness in Western culture influence the meaning-making of media texts among audiences in Japan, it would be interesting in the future study to analyze the difference on the interpretation of Western feminist films between Japanese audiences who watch Western films regularly and those who do not. It can also be interesting to analyze how non-White feminist films are interpreted by audiences in Japan

Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous conclusion section, the majority of audiences in Japan resonate with the feminist themes portrayed in the film. The interpretation of these themes by Japanese audiences may be influenced by Japan's history of Europeanization (Ishii, 1998, p. 40) and a cultural tendency towards White worship or positive attitudes towards Western culture (Bonnett, 2000, pp. 92-93). It is also possible that these audiences are particularly interested in or familiar with Western culture. To gain deeper insights into how embeddedness in Western culture influences the interpretation of media texts among Japanese audiences, future studies could compare the interpretations of Western feminist films between Japanese viewers who regularly watch Western films and those who do not. Additionally, analyzing how non-White feminist films are perceived by audiences in Japan would also be interesting.

Lastly, this study did not collect personal data such as geography, social class, and profession of audiences, which is arguably the most significant limitation. Societal and cultural backgrounds strongly influence how audiences interpret media texts, as Morley (1980, pp. 266-279) asserts. What can also be an interesting data for the future research is gender and sexuality, particularly focusing on how female audiences interpret post-feminist media texts, a topic that remains underexplored (Cavalcante et al., 2017, pp. 1-13). Additionally, considering the interpretations of queer individuals is crucial due to the intersectional nature of discussions in feminism, an area still relatively neglected in Japanese feminist academia (Nonaka, 2015, pp. 156-163). Future researchers could delve into these social attributes by employing different data sources, such as interviews. They could concentrate on discourse from audiences with

specific societal attributes or compare interpretations across different groups. This approach would enrich the analysis of how feminist themes are interpreted among film audiences, providing deeper contextual insights.

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## Appendix: Final code trees





