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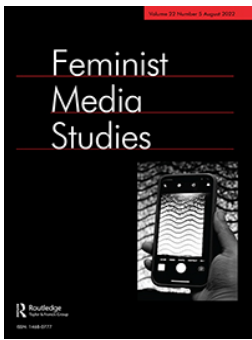
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# The trivialization of sexual harassment in Japanese mascot culture: Japanese audience responses to YouTube videos of Kumamon

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## ABSTRACT

Studies indicate that, in Japan, sexual harassment is rarely reported because of a sociocultural pressure to maintain harmony and a patriarchal expectation for women to be passive. Sexual harassment also remains visible and unregulated in online spaces. It is particularly prevalent in videos of *yuru-kyara* (mascots) in which acts, such as lifting skirts, are framed as humorous. To explore the influence of such acts on Japanese audiences' views of sexual harassment, this article examines comments underneath YouTube videos of Kumamon and situates them in a Japanese sociocultural context through a consideration of gender norms, the workplace environment, and contemporary feminism. Drawing on feminist work about sexual harassment and studies on its mediation, we argue that the comments demonstrate that the humor in Kumamon's videos, alongside his characteristics as a *yuru-kyara*, trivialize sexual harassment and harmfully contribute to sexist cultural norms in Japan. However, our findings also reveal that, since 2019, Japanese YouTube users have begun to openly condemn Kumamon's "cheeky" behavior. This indicates that, after being initially hesitant to respond to the #MeToo movement, people in Japan are now beginning to defy cultural norms by calling out sexual harassment online.

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## Introduction

Sexual harassment, or *sekuhara* as it is known in Japanese, is typically framed within academic studies as an act of patriarchal control that is sexual, unsolicited, and non-consensual in nature (Barr, Paula. 1993; Xu, Kaibin and Yan Tan 2020). In Japan, *sekuhara* has only been widely recognized since the mainstream media began to cover this topic in 1989, when a female employee in Fukuoka took her employers to court for workplace sexual harassment (Muta, Kazue. 2004). Although journalists continue to report cases of sexual harassment, the mainstream media, paradoxically, remains a space in which it is still visibly enacted and often framed as humorous (Huen, Yuki. 2007). This framing of *sekuhara* is particularly evident within media coverage of *yuru-kyara* (mascots) at public events who interact with female coworkers by

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grabbing their breasts, lifting their skirts, or engaging in other unsolicited acts that correspond with widely accepted definitions of sexual harassment (Barr 1993; Xu, Kaibin and Yan Tan 2020). By sharing these videos on YouTube, social media users have sparked online debates about the appropriate nature of this behavior and about how *sekuhara* is viewed within Japan. Although these actions by *yuru-kyara* resonate profoundly with widely accepted definitions of sexual harassment, this study is the first to examine how Japanese audiences respond to this conduct and how it shapes their views of sexual harassment (Dalton, Emma. 2019).

To explore audience responses to mediated sexual harassment, this article analyzes comments underneath user-generated YouTube videos of the famous *yuru-kyara*, Kumamon, a black bear that is characterized by his sponsors as a hard-working manager. In these videos, he performs non-consensual acts of a sexual nature on female audience members such as grabbing their breasts. Our thematic analysis, which situates the comments within a Japanese sociocultural context, illustrates that the humorous framing of Kumamon's conduct perpetuates harmful patriarchal attitudes about sexual harassment that can be found within the Japanese workplace. We demonstrate that Kumamon's blurring of human, animal, and animated characteristics, also contributes to a normative discourse that sexual harassment is humorous and harmless. This trivialization is particularly damaging in the context of Kumamon's characterization as a hard-working employee because his behavior reinforces norms of sexual objectification and suppression of women in the Japanese workplace. Nevertheless, since 2019, a growing number of comments have begun to condemn Kumamon's behavior and other users' positive responses to it. These findings indicate that Japanese audiences are feeling increasingly confident to call out the sexual harassment that they encounter online and suggests the emergence of a similar movement to #MeToo.

## The *yuru-kyara* (mascots) and their reception

Over the last two decades, mascots have played an increasingly significant role in marketing Japanese products and services. Popular *yuru-kyara*, such as Kumamon, have a strong online presence and attract millions of subscribers from across the globe (Occhi, Debra. 2018). The *kawaii* nature of the *yuru-kyara* and their so-called "cheeky" behavior is essential to their popularity (Occhi 2018).<sup>1</sup> *Kawaii* refers to the "adorable" and "lovable" nature of the *yuru-kyara* and this discourse of "cuteness" positions their "cheeky" behavior as innocent and innocuous (McVeigh, Brian. 1996). This projected innocence seems at odds with the behavior of certain *yuru-kyara* who grope and grab female audience members. As user-generated videos indicate, women in the audience often respond to these acts with nervous laughter or body language that indicates their confusion, discomfort, or indignation. Despite these responses, there have been no concerted efforts by the public to demand that brands regulate the behavior of the *yuru-kyara* (Bonnah, Theodore. 2019). They are neither regulated by Japanese law nor online platforms. There is, therefore, no official guidance that discourages *yuru-kyara* from engaging in sexual harassment and, as a consequence, no motivation for brands to stop this behavior. As such, any regulation of his behavior emerges from the public who can voice their concerns on sites such as YouTube. Since we reveal how the Japanese public believe the

behavior of *yuru-kyara* should be monitored and penalized, this article has significant implications for the *yuru-kyara* and their associated brands.

A handful of studies have been conducted on *yuru-kyara*, such as analyzing their *kawaii* nature, their role in the Japanese tourism industry, and their commercial value (Bonnah 2019; Occhi 2018). As a field, mascot studies makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the roles played by entertainment, marketing, and celebrity in everyday life in Japan (Occhi 2018). By studying the *yuru-kyara*, who are “typically viewed as representatives of specific social and cultural messages,” we can analyze how they influence both local and international perceptions of Japanese society (Occhi, Debra. 2012, 111). Although few studies analyze public perceptions of *yuru-kyara*, our analysis of Kumamon’s videos is informed by scholarship that explores the ambiguous nature of the *yuru-kyara* because we can infer from these why their “cheeky” behavior is tolerated and excused. As Occhi (2018) argues, *yuru-kyara* are not bound by societal codes of behavior because, even though they are human social actors, their *kawaii* costumes blur the boundaries between humans, animals, and animation. However, Brown, Stephen. (2010) elucidates that *yuru-kyara* tend to be anthropomorphized by Japanese audiences because their actions are primarily viewed through a human frame of reference. A consideration of sexual harassment with reference to Brown’s (2010) and Occhi’s (2018) findings, raises questions about the extent to which the *kawaii* characteristics of the Kumamon costume influence public perceptions about the appropriateness of “cheeky” behavior performed by an actor who, according to widely accepted definitions, is engaging in sexual harassment (Grauerholz, Elizabeth and Amy King 1997).

As we have indicated, studies have not yet considered how the publicly displayed and virtually shared behavior of the *yuru-kyara* could trivialize sexual harassment and undermine women’s experiences of it in the workplace. Thus, our article is unique in its consideration of how the media’s humorous and innocent framing of the *yuru-kyara* not only justifies their actions in the eyes of audiences, but also perpetuates a discourse that sexual harassment is a harmless act. In addition, as Kaibin and Tan (2020) reveal, few studies focus on the actions of the perpetrators or consider how others justify their behavior. This article therefore fills gaps in both feminist media studies and mascot studies. From a feminist perspective, we can theorize that the images of sexual harassment that we see in Kumamon’s videos could validate normative social beliefs about gender, consent, and sexism that feminist activists, such as those who have taken part in the #MeToo campaign, are seeking to dismantle (Hasunuma, Linda and Ki-young Shin 2019; Kaibin and Tan 2020). Thus, we argue that Kumamon’s videos, and their influence on audience perceptions of sexual harassment, will certainly be of interest to anti-sexual harassment campaigners.

## **Kumamon**

Kumamon is a bear mascot with rosy cheeks and big eyes who emanates from the Kumamoto prefecture. He is reported to have made over 1.4 billion dollars in revenue during 2018 (Nikkei Asian Review 2019). With his domestic and international success, he has been described as Japan’s Mickey Mouse and compared to Hello Kitty (McVeigh 1996). Kumamon’s online videos capture his interactions with live audiences at sporting and promotional events. He does not speak, but communicates through gesturing or is

spoken for by his assistants. He is known for his “cheeky” behavior which includes lifting skirts, grabbing women by the waist, attempting to undo women’s clothes, and pushing people over (Occhi 2018). In his promotional work for Kumamoto, Kumamon is characterized as a hard-working general manager (Occhi 2012). His characterization as “a model” employee renders him an intriguing subject for this article since, according to scholarship and the Japanese media, sexual harassment is particularly prevalent in Japanese workplaces (Huen 2007; Occhi 2018). It is therefore problematic that a *yuru-kyara* who is celebrated as a model employee engages in “cheeky” behaviors that could be described as sexual harassment (Barr 1993).

### **Conceptualizing sexual harassment in the Japanese workplace: harmony (*wa*), humor, and a lack of regulation**

The concept of *sekuhara* became widely known to the Japanese public in 1989 as a result of the media coverage of the Fukuoka case, which involved a female employee who took her publishing company to court. It was the very first instance of *sekuhara* to be brought to the Japanese justice system and the first time the media had covered a case of sexual harassment in Japan (Tsunoda 1993). The Fukuoka case therefore enabled Japanese women to frame their own experiences of sexual harassment within a Japanese context for the very first time. The Fukuoka case played a huge role in shaping the Japanese conceptualization of sexual harassment (Chan-Tiberghien, Jennifer. 2004). Court documentation moderated the violent connotations of sexual harassment by referring to it as either “*seiteki iyagarese*” (sexual unpleasantness) or *sekuhara* (Shinohara, Chika. 2009). As Shinohara (2009) demonstrates, the concept of *sekuhara* downplays the violent connotations that are present in the original American phrase “sexual harassment.” It is therefore a hybrid between the American definition and Japanese attitudes towards women that view sexual harassment as a form of miscommunication that is uncomfortable for women rather than an act of aggression perpetrated by men (Takashi Kakuyama, Takashi et al. 2003). So as not to depoliticize sexual harassment and undermine its impact on women, this article only uses the term “*sekuhara*” when specifically referring to this concept.

Sexual harassment does not in itself constitute a criminal act in Japan (Kaibin and Tan 2020). It is only criminalized when it is associated with other criminal acts such as defamation and molestation (Kumi Ogasawara, Kazumi. 2011). According to Dalton (2017, 209), the Japanese legal system has been slow to criminalize it because “the potential effectiveness of an anti-sexual harassment law is hampered in a patriarchal society where the sexual objectification and exploitation of women and girls is routine.” As Muta, Kazue. (2016) indicates, a significant change in normative attitudes towards women and sexual harassment is a necessary precursor to the effective implementation of concrete legislative change. For Muta (2016), drastic legislative change will only happen if Japanese feminists unite to form an activist movement against sexual harassment. However, such a movement remains undocumented. Indeed, as Hasunuma and Shin (2019) mention, the #MeToo movement has not yet gathered the same momentum in Japan as in other Asian countries such as China and South Korea.

In addition to lacking legislative support, Japanese women who wish to report sexual harassment face obstacles in the form of a workplace culture that promotes hierarchy, subservience, and the maintenance of social harmony at all costs (Hasunuma and Shin

2019). It is therefore unsurprising that sexual harassment is commonplace in Japanese workplaces and is often unreported (Fuchs, Tamara and Fabien Schäfer 2020). According to government surveys, more than 40% of surveyed women in Japan have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, but more than 60% of them “endured” it without reporting it or confronting the perpetrator. The most common reason for this inaction was a fear that it would have an “adverse effect on work” (Nikkei Asian Review 2019). Hasunuma and Shin (2019) corroborate these findings. They argue that, for many Japanese women, their choice not to report sexual harassment is rooted in a fear that this disclosure will have a negative impact on their professional reputation and the workplace environment (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). This fear is partly rooted in a societal perceptions of sexual harassment as the consequence of a woman’s inability to maintain her honor in the workplace (Huen 2007). In a BBC documentary, Sugita Mio, who is a female MP of Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party, touches on this gendered norm by remarking that “as a professional woman, one should be prepared for such kinds of situations” (*Japan’s Secret Shame* 2018). This attitude of victim blaming, which is also a common theme of transnational scholarship about sexual harassment, places the onus on women to modify their behavior rather than on men to stop acting in ways that make women feel uncomfortable (Lonsway, Kimberly, Lilia Cortina, and Vicki Magley 2008)

Another reason as to why so few women report sexual harassment is that they have few precedents with which to assess the severity of their own experiences (Muta, Kazue. 2010). They can struggle to recognize whether a perpetrator’s behavior is sexual harassment or something that other colleagues would accept as a normal expression of superiority or workplace banter (Fuchs and Schäfer 2020). Studies indicate that Japanese men also struggle to recognize what behavior constitutes sexual harassment, including those who have committed such acts (Chan-Tiberghien 2004).

If we examine the Japanese cultural context more closely, we can see that the pressure on women to tolerate sexual harassment, rather than report it, is rooted in a societal expectation for women to be passive and maintain social harmony (*wa*) (Huen 2007). As Dalton elucidates, the Japanese workplace acts a microcosm of a Japanese society that supports “the sexual objectification of women and discourag[e]s women from speaking out against violation” (2019, 2). Due to a Japanese societal expectation that women only use polite language, they are very unlikely to assertively confront perpetrators (Muta 2010). In a study on *sekuhara* in the workplace, Huen explains the role of *wa* as follows: “Japanese society places importance on the maintenance of *wa* (harmony) in personal relationships and business dealings” (2007, 812). Huen adds that, within the workplace, sexist acts and jokes are perceived as contributing towards harmony, whereas complaints about work behavior are seen as destructive (2007). Huen’s study therefore illustrates that, in the Japanese workplace, *wa*, humour, and sexism are intertwined. Huen’s work thereby illuminates the complex discourses with which women must contend if they wish to report sexual harassment and the obstacles that they may face in convincing their employers that a colleague’s conduct is inappropriate. Kumamon’s characterization as a hard-working employee who playfully engages in sexual harassment to amuse others resonates strongly with Huen’s observations about sexism in the Japanese workplace. Hence, Huen’s examination of *wa*, victim blaming, and humor provides a relevant sociocultural framework through which to



consider discourses within online comments about Kumamon's behavior towards women.

### Trivializing sexual harassment through media humor

By arguing that mainstream and social media shapes the public's conceptualization of sexual harassment and its impact on women, studies have underscored the importance of researching both the mediation of sexual harassment and audience responses to this mediation (Dalton 2019; Shinohara 2009). Indeed, feminists in Japan have also expressed concerns about the role of the media in perpetuating sexual harassment, which has led to a recommendation by CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) that video games and manga be banned if they normalize *sekuhara* (Muta 2010). As scholarship is yet to consider how audiences in Japan are influenced by the mediation of sexual harassment when it is framed as a humorous or trivial act, our theoretical framework incorporates relevant studies from non-Japanese contexts. Most of these studies hail from the United States and indicate that all forms of media, such as music videos, social media, and television programs, intertwine to trivialize sexual violence (Mallett, Ford, and Woodzicka 2016). This trivialization encourages audiences to view sexual harassment as a matter that they can easily dismiss and justify (Montemurro 2003). For example, Monique Ward, L Monique's (2002) study reveals that frequent exposure to sexist music videos that trivialize sexual harassment encourages viewers to see women as sexual objects rather than subjects experiencing sexual violence. Similarly, Grauerholz and King (2007) posit that behaviors that would be considered as sexually inappropriate in real workplaces are often not labeled as "sexual harassment" on television. They argue that this mediation can cause viewers to respond with sexual interest to the perpetrator's object of desire and engage in inappropriate conduct at work.

Studies that focus on the mediation of sexual harassment within the context of comedy demonstrate that this framing leads to desensitization and therefore reduces the likelihood that audiences see sexual harassment as a serious social issue. Mallett, Ford, and Woodzicka assert: "Humor can actually make sexist messages more dangerous and difficult to confront than serious remarks [...] sexist humor simultaneously diminishes women and trivializes that diminishment" (2016, 272). If we consider the impact that the media can have on normative behaviors in workplaces, we can argue that, by framing sexual harassment in the context of comedy, the media perpetuates the idea that it is a typical aspect of workplace banter (Grauerholz and King 1997). As a result of the positive representation of sexist jokes and behavior, audiences can internalize the idea that sexual harassment in the workplace is an acceptable form of comradery that can cement friendships. Such disparaging humor perpetuates the message that sexual harassment is a socially acceptable aspect of workplace culture that requires no intervention. Although they do not focus on mediation, studies from Japan demonstrate that jokes about sexual harassment in the workplace reinforce the idea that it is a trivial matter (Kakuyama et al. 2003). Thus, studies from Japan corroborate the findings of Grauerholz and King.



## Method

As sexual harassment is a product of an imbalance of power, and discourse has the potential to perpetuate such structures, scholarship underlines the appropriateness of employing qualitative methods to examine societal attitudes towards sexual harassment (Fuchs and Schäfer 2020). This article therefore employs a thematic analysis to uncover the key discourses that emerge in comments that respond to videos of Kumamon engaging in “cheeky” behavior. Drawing on a theoretical framework that combines studies about the *yuru-kyara*, scholarship about sexual harassment in Japan, and research on the media’s trivialization of sexual harassment, this article examines audience responses to Kumamon’s “cheeky” behavior and analyzes the ways in which it trivialized sexual harassment. As the scholarship on the media’s trivialization of sexual harassment is based on findings from the Anglophone world, we ensure that our application of these theories to our dataset is nuanced within a Japanese sociocultural context.

YouTube was selected for this study because it is the dominant online platform for user-generated video content in Japan (Sung 2020). Our sampling strategy involved three stages and produced a sample of 6 videos posted between 2013 and 2018. Firstly, we inputted the search terms “Kumamon” and “*chikan*” (molester) into YouTube. Secondly, to ensure significance, videos with fewer than 20,000 views were eliminated. Finally, videos were only added to the sample if they included one or more occurrences of Kumamon’s “cheeky” behaviors that reflect Barr’s (1993) and (Kaibin and Tan 2020) definitions of sexual harassment. Thus, in each video, the women who are targeted by Kumamon’s “cheeky” behavior are female co-hosts or female guests. Each act of “cheekiness” is met with verbal and/or physical disapproval from the victims themselves, others on stage, or witnesses in the audience. Since the responses from the live audiences deem Kumamon’s actions as unsolicited, non-consensual, and inappropriate, our sample is ideal for a study about sexual harassment. As this article frames online audience reactions to Kumamon within a Japanese sociocultural context, the selected videos all take place in public settings across Japan. Thus, all the Japanese comments that are analyzed in this article respond to videos that capture how live Japanese audiences react to Kumamon.

Once the 6 videos were selected, we collected all comments that were written in Japanese and ignored those in other languages. The first 50 comments (and the subsequent thread of replies) from each video were extracted. For videos with fewer than 50 comments, all comments in Japanese have been collected. This amounted to a dataset of 584 comments that were posted between 2013 and 2021 inclusive. The size of this dataset mirrors existing studies that reflect on sociocultural attitudes towards sexual harassment but do not seek to generalize about populations (North 2007). The sample of comments is not intended to be representative of Japanese society as a whole. Nevertheless, the dataset is sufficient for exploring the relevance of existing scholarly theories about sexual harassment, the media, and humor to the “cheeky” behavior of *yuru-kyara* and how audiences respond to it.

To identify and categorize the online reactions to Kumamon’s “cheeky” behavior, we created a codebook that was based on a hybrid inductive and deductive thematic framework (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). To situate our findings within respective scholarship about the *yuru-kyara* and sexual harassment, the creation of the initial codebook was informed by our theoretical framework. The code “humor” categorized

comments that framed Kumamon's actions as humorous or trivial, "sexual interest" referred to comments that displayed sexual interest in the targets of Kumamon's "cheeky" actions, and "*kawaii*" related to comments that legitimized Kumamon's behavior because of his "cute" appearance. Based on our reading of the comments, we created the following codes to recognize the key themes in the dataset: "calling out Kumamon's inappropriate behavior," "direct reference to *sekuhara* or sexual harassment," "desire to emulate Kumamon," "victim blaming" and "person wearing the costume." For instance, "person wearing the costume" included speculation about the gender and appearance of the person who wears the Kumamon costume. For the purpose of this article, all comments have been anonymized for the protection of the platform users.<sup>2</sup>

## Analysis

### ***Defending Kumamon's "cheeky" behavior: Humor, sexual interest, physical appearance, and victim blaming***

The thematic analysis of the 6 videos revealed a wide variety of responses to Kumamon's behavior, ranging from disgust to amusement and even approval. Since the most frequently coded themes in the dataset were "humor," followed by "*kawaii*," this suggests that many Japanese viewers of Kumamon's videos consider his "cheeky" acts as trivial and justifiable. These comments include laughing emojis, the use of "ww" or "草(*grass*)" (which are the equivalent of "lol"), and descriptions of Kumamon's behavior with words such as *kawaii* and *kakoi* (charismatic). Some of these comments defend his "cheeky" actions because they are "*kawaii*". A small number of comments express a desire to copy his "funny" behavior. The reactions of these viewers resonate strongly with (Grauerholz and King 1997) that if audiences are exposed to mediated sexual harassment that is framed as humorous, it leads to their seeing it as a trivial matter. Hence, these positive reactions to Kumamon's "cheeky" behavior show that the humorous framing of Kumamon's acts trivializes sexual harassment and promotes the idea that it is a "legitimate, normal, and acceptable" way of interacting in everyday social situations (Grauerholz and King 1997, 144).

Particularly damaging are the comments that defend Kumamon's conduct through victim blaming. For instance, one person posts "you can't help it if you have such beautiful legs nearby." Others ignore the implications of Kumamon's behavior and criticize the women for their reactions, including comments such as, "you think it is funny to be hit like that?" and "what has he done to be treated like this?." Such comments demonstrate victim blaming because they perpetuate a belief that men naturally have uncontrollable sexual impulses that are triggered by women who are attractive (*sukebeiness*) (Muta 2016). This attitude illustrates the ongoing commodification and objectification of women within Japanese society, which has long been criticized by Japanese and Western feminists alike (Kaibin and Tan 2020). By suggesting that Kumamon's targets have no right to resist him, these comments perpetuate a damaging discourse that those who are victims of sexual harassment should remain silent, unresponsive, and not take offense to such acts. This attitude echoes Japan's social expectation for women to be polite even to a man who is sexually harassing them (Dalton 2019; Muta 2004). Drawing on Huen's study (2007), we can observe that the

attitudes expressed in these comments are likely informed by Japanese societal expectations for women to remain passive in order that social harmony (*wa*) is maintained. Hence, the comments that defend Kumamon perpetuate a societal norm that not only hinders victims' ability to say "no" assertively, but also promotes the notion that the victim is at fault for eliciting sexually inappropriate behavior (Muta 2016).

Through their graphically expressing a desire to perform sexual acts to the targets of Kumamon's "cheeky behavior," a significant number of the comments demonstrate Grauerholz and King's theory that mediated sexist humor can trigger a response of sexual interest (1997). For example, one user states, "nice legs, let me lick them" and another writes, "I want to suck on that foot, too." Others refer to specific aspects of Kumamon's behavior that are portrayed in the videos, such as grabbing breasts and lifting skirts. They then state their desire to copy these acts: "I want to be Kumamon," "this is my dream!," and "tomorrow, you and I will ride the train wearing this costume." Another user praises Kumamon by referring to him as a *shishō* (teacher/master). Comments that express a desire to emulate Kumamon and those that build on his actions by envisaging sexual acts that are not performed in his videos, illustrate that the mediation of Kumamon's "cheeky" behavior is legitimizing their perceptions of women as sexual objects (Monique Ward 2002). We can, therefore, observe that Kumamon's public acts of sexual harassment in the offline world are mediated and then replicated in the public space of the internet. Particularly indicative of this is the following comment which, despite acknowledging that Kumamon's behavior may be inappropriate, suggests that his public performance of sexual acts legitimizes them: "Publicly obscene behavior ... is okay? I want to take Kumamon's place then!" Overall, the comments coded in this category demonstrate that, by inspiring certain audience members to objectify Kumamon's targets and make jokes about engaging in sexual acts with them, videos of his "cheeky" behavior are undermining and erasing women's experiences of sexual harassment.

The fact that some comments that were coded under "sexual interest" refer to the Japanese workplace is of even greater concern. Some users call the women in the videos "*omochikaeri kōsu*" (takeout course). This refers to girls being brought back to hotels after a social event such as a *nomikai* (a drinking party that is considered an important aspect of work culture). This framing of Kumamon's actions within the context of a *nomikai* demonstrates that users are indeed viewing them through the lens of the Japanese workplace. By framing unsolicited sexual acts conducted by a *yuru-kyara* who is known as a "model employee" as humorous, Kumamon's videos indicate that such behavior in the workplace is permitted or even encouraged (Occhi 2018). The mediation of his "cheeky" behavior thereby reinforces the harmful Japanese gender norm that sexual harassment is a form of amusing workplace comradery (Huen 2007).

Some of the comments indicate that Kumamon's status as a *yuru-kyara* legitimizes his behavior. These findings resonate with Occhi's (2018) argument that, because of their *kawaii* and animalistic characteristics, *yuru-kyara* are not bound by societal codes of behavior. Certain comments argue that Kumamon's conduct is not threatening because he is wearing a *kawaii* costume: "it is ok because he is a bear," "if you wear Kumamon's suit, you will be surrounded by women, and if you don't, you will be surrounded by the police," "by wearing this suit everything Kumamon does is acceptable [praise emoji]" and "this is the privilege of being *kawaii*." Hence, even though his acts echo widely accepted definitions of sexual harassment, the comments reveal a belief that the inappropriateness

of his behavior is diminished by the *yuru-kyara* costume (Kaibin and Tan 2020). Once again, these comments erase the women who are the target of Kumamon's "cheeky" behavior. The users are not judging the appropriateness of Kumamon's actions by considering how his targets respond. Instead, they are making excuses for his actions based on his innocuous appearance.

The theme that the physical appearance or other qualities of the harasser can legitimize their behavior appears again when users argue that the inappropriate nature of Kumamon's behavior depends on the attractiveness and gender of the person underneath the costume. One person legitimizes Kumamon's acts by stating: "this is reserved for handsome men." A few suggest that Kumamon's acts are innocuous because there is a woman inside the costume: "If you compare the height difference, it really does look like the person inside is female," and "that's ok, it's a woman inside." The users who express that the Kumamon costume is worn by a woman present a very heteronormative view of sexual harassment that legitimizes such acts if they take place between two women. They present a binary heterosexist perception that men experience and act on sexual desire, whereas women are always the passive recipients of it. Such essentialism diminishes women because it perpetuates the idea that women are not in charge of their own sexuality (Hlavka 2014).

### ***Condemning Kumamon: Challenging sexual harassment in the post #metoo era***

Although all the comments that have been analyzed so far were spread consistently between 2013 until 2021, the vast majority of coded comments that criticize Kumamon's behavior and explicitly refer to it as sexual harassment, such as by using the term "*sekuhara*," were posted from 2019 onwards. The limited use of the term "*sekuhara*" prior to 2019 suggests that few users made connections between Kumamon's actions and transnational feminist debates about sexual harassment. As scholarship testifies, media coverage of *sekuhara* is limited in Japan and when the #MeToo movement spiked in early 2018, it failed to create the same kind of impact in Japan as it did in other Asian countries (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). The fact that these videos of Kumamon did not ignite a debate about *sekuhara* amongst Japanese audiences prior to 2019 echoes the findings of previous studies that point to a lack of engagement or awareness of sexual harassment and its implications in Japan (Huen 2007). In comments posted from 2019 onwards, however, there is a notable increase in the explicit use of the terms *sekuhara*, *shokken ranyō* (abuse of authority), *Kōzenwaisetsu* (public obscenity) and even "sexual harassment" typed in English. In early 2021, one user proclaims, "nowadays, this would be a big 'sexual harassment,' 'Kumamon is inappropriate' problem lol." Another in early 2021 states, "eight years ago this would have been fine, but not now." These comments indicate a growing awareness of *sekuhara* and *pawahara* (power harassment) amongst Japanese audiences that signifies the lagging, but increasingly influential, effect of feminist movements such as #MeToo.

Indeed, since 2019, we can see the influence of the #MeToo movement in the increasing number of users explicitly denouncing Kumamon's actions through language such as *ossan* (weird old man), *hentai* (pervert), and *injuu* (perverted monster). These terms position Kumamon's behavior as outside the normal realms of acceptability within

Japanese society, thereby illustrating that these viewers do not see sexual harassment as an appropriate form of social interaction (Muta 2010). These public condemnations of Kumamon demonstrate a willingness by Japanese YouTube users to disrupt social norms of *wa* and politeness in order to call out inappropriate sexual behavior (Huen 2007). These comments therefore contradict existing studies about women's passivity towards sexual harassment in Japan, indicating that some women are now willing to denounce this behavior online (Dalton 2019).

Most comments that criticize Kumamon's acts are rebuttals to users who condone Kumamon's "cheeky" actions for reasons such as him being a *yuru-kyara*, *kawaii*, or a costume worn by a woman. For instance, "even if it were women inside Kumamon, it still wouldn't be okay," "is skirt lifting allowed if the person inside is a woman? Is it okay if it's a handsome guy? This kind of outdated discrimination is unacceptable!" and "even if you are a *yuru-kyara*. Even if you are in a costume. This is a no. It is sexual harassment." We can argue that, for these users, neither the humorous framing of Kumamon's actions nor his *kawaii* costume has engendered them to view sexual harassment as a trivial matter. Hence, we can hypothesize that the anonymous space of the internet may be facilitating a more open and critical dialogue about sexual harassment amongst Japanese people.

By expressing concern that Kumamon's "sexist" behavior will have a negative impact on "Japan's international reputation," stating that he brings "shame" to Japan, and saying that he "must be penalized," some comments (posted since 2019) frame his behavior within a transnational feminist context. This suggests that these users are calling for Japan to catch up to other countries who take sexual harassment more seriously. The fact that Kumamon has never been sanctioned, despite frequent resistance by audience members to his unwanted physical contact, makes him symbolic of the difficulty of holding perpetrators legally accountable in Japan (Occhi 2018; Ogasawara 2011). The YouTube users call for Kumamon's behavior to be reprimanded by writing, "Arrest him for sexual harassment!" and "let's sue this lewd bear!" Some playfully call for him to be held accountable by using an emoji of a police officer or creating a scenario in which they hand Kumamon to the police and declare: "sir, this is the bear." Terms such as *waisetsuzai* (charges of obscenity) and *genkōhantaiho* (in flagrante delicto) are also employed. The use of a lexical field of crime, direct references to sexual harassment, and criticism of its lack of criminalization in Japan, not only signify the increasing awareness of sexual harassment amongst the Japanese public, but also the growing recognition of critical gaps in the legal system in Japan. According to recommendations of CEDAW, these types of behaviors help to push relevant legislation on to the political agenda, as seen with precedents such as the Fukuoka case (Muta 2010). Hence, we can argue that these comments posted under Kumamon's videos have more significance than trivial internet chatter: they are contributing towards a feminist cause to hold perpetrators accountable for sexual harassment.

## Discussion

Although this study indicates that the humor in Kumamon's videos trivializes sexual harassment for most of his online audience and reinforces harmful social norms that blame, objectify, and silence victims, it also illustrates that there is a growing feminist trend amongst Japanese YouTube users to call out sexual harassment. Videos of Kumamon engaging in "cheeky" behavior have therefore opened a public dialogue

about what constitutes sexual harassment and why greater social and political efforts must be made to bring perpetrators to justice. Our study therefore demonstrates that, by encouraging people to publicly denounce sexual harassment, feminist movements are beginning to have an influence on online interactions amongst Japanese people. However, the proliferation of sexist comments and humorous responses articulated by most of Kumamon's online audience highlights that feminists in Japan still face an uphill battle to raise awareness of the harm caused by sexual harassment and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.

Our findings illustrate that existing literature about sexual harassment from both Japan and the Anglophone world offers a valuable framework for interpreting how audiences perceive the "cheeky" conduct of *yuru-kyara*. These findings solidify existing theories about the correlation between sexist media exposure and the trivialization of sexual harassment and how this can engender a societal desensitization towards, and acceptance of, such behavior (Shinohara 2009). Ford's (2000) work, which theorizes that sexual harassment is difficult for audiences to recognize when it is veiled in humor, offers a pertinent explanation for why multiple viewers respond with amusement. What is more, responses that articulate sexual arousal on the part of audience members echo (Grauerholz and King 1997) findings that media representations of sexual harassment as humorous can provoke the audience's sexual interest and increase their acceptance of sexual harassment in society. Thus, we can argue that Kumamon's videos are highly problematic because, by framing his actions as humorous and merely an innocent expression of a *yuru-kyara's* *kawaii* nature, they legitimize sexually inappropriate behavior. Furthermore, by drawing on the studies of Grauerholz and King's (1997), Shinohara (2009), and Kakuyama et al. (2003), we can argue that, because they normalize offline behaviors such as groping women, Kumamon's videos may have real-life implications on gender-based social dynamics. Finally, it is important to state here that, because Kumamon is characterized as a "model" employee, his "cheeky" behavior has particularly negative implications for working women in Japan since it normalizes sexual harassment within the workplace and positions it as a form of banter between colleagues (Fuchs and Schäfer 2020; Occhi 2018).

Besides supporting the theory that the media trivializes sexual harassment when it is framed as comedic, the online comments also provide further insight into why Kumamon's behavior is widely accepted within Japan and is yet to be regulated or penalized. Echoing Occhi's (2018) arguments that the *kyuru-kyara* are not subject to societal norms, some viewers argue that his behavior is not threatening because of the *kawaii* nature of his costume. Nevertheless, many of the comments primarily frame Kumamon's behavior as that of a human in a costume rather than that of a *kawaii* bear brought to life. For instance, some assert that Kumamon's behavior would be acceptable if there is an attractive man or woman inside the costume. These discourses are troubling as they suggest that sexual harassment is acceptable if the perpetrator has certain characteristics. The speculation about the gender and physical appearance of the person wearing the costume illustrates that his videos instigate discussions that trivialize the impact of sexual harassment on victims. Our findings therefore differ from Occhi's (2018) theory because they provide evidence that the sexually inappropriate acts of the *yuru-kyara* can have a similar impact to those of human actors on television. Indeed, these

comments indicate that Kumamon's videos normalize, and even encourage, sexually inappropriate behavior. Hence, our research highlights the importance of setting guidelines for the *yuru-kyara* so that they do not commit acts that would encourage their audiences to condone, or even engage in, sexually inappropriate behavior. More broadly, our findings also point to the deeply embedded nature of sexual harassment in Japanese workplaces, thereby indicating that organizations must create and implement guidelines that will both discourage sexual harassment and support those who have experienced it.

By justifying Kumamon's behavior in these ways, these comments not only silence Kumamon's female targets, but they also perpetuate a harmful discourse that sexual harassment may be acceptable in particular situations. One discourse into which these comments feed is one that has a transnational resonance: the justification of sexual harassment through clothing (Sultana, Abeda. 2012). However, these comments invert normative discourses that usually justify sexual harassment by attributing blame on the woman for choosing an outfit that inspired a man's lust (Lonsway, Cortina, and Magley 2008). Although many studies have focused on how women's clothing choices may influence the likelihood of their being sexually harassed (Turney 2018), scholarship is yet to consider the role played by the outfit or appearance of the perpetrator. Even though the comments from the dataset reflect on the behavior of the male perpetrator rather than the female victim, they still seek to justify and mitigate the perpetrator's actions. This discourse is thus merely the flipside of the same patriarchal norm that absolves the male perpetrator of his responsibility.

Although YouTube users who denounce Kumamon's "cheeky" behavior and criticize those who justify it represent a minority of the dataset, the emergence of such comments has positive implications for women in Japan. The direct discussion of sexual harassment, such as by using the term *sekuhara* or calling for Kumamon to be arrested, indicates that there is a growing awareness of sexual harassment in Japan. Below Kumamon's videos, we can observe that Japanese women are starting to challenge social conventions that discourage them to call out sexual harassment (Dalton 2019). These findings signal that feminist movements such as #MeToo are beginning to influence Japanese internet users and their online behavior. Furthermore, they also indicate that the anonymity of the internet has made it possible for women to speak out about sexual harassment from within a patriarchal society that has traditionally silenced them. As some of these comments are calling for Kumamon to be arrested, and therefore for a perpetrator to be held accountable, they are contributing to feminist work to speak out against sexual harassment and to ensure that perpetrators face the consequences of their actions. We can hypothesize that these comments may signify the beginning of a Japanese version of #MeToo that may build into a larger movement that will ensure sexual harassment is finally criminalized in Japan.

We must once again emphasize, however, that the comments that criticize Kumamon still represent the minority of responses that were posted in 2020 and 2021. The mediation of Kumamon's "cheeky" conduct is therefore a double-edged sword because it simultaneously offers a space for the proliferation of sexist comments and an opportunity for the Japanese public to condemn sexual harassment. The fact that the voices calling out Kumamon's behavior continue to be drowned out by comments that justify his actions and find them humorous underscores that feminist activism to end sexual



harassment in Japan remains vital (Muta 2010). The nature of these online responses indicates that the agenda for the feminist movement must continue to include disseminating messages that clearly state which behavior constitutes sexual harassment and challenging a sociocultural expectation that women should passively accept such behaviors.

Finally, it is important to note that some of the videos are titled along the lines of “The prurient Kumamon” (translated). Hence, viewers may recognize elements of *sekuhara* that they otherwise would not have noticed. The sample analyzed in this study was limited to those who have access to the videos, either driven by personal interest or by algorithm. Our analysis therefore does not claim to offer a representative view of Japanese society. Further qualitative analysis, such as focus groups, is required to understand the representativeness of our findings.

## Conclusion

Overall, this article demonstrates that the media can trivialize sexual harassment and contribute to harmful societal gender norms such as victim blaming and the objectification of women. As hypothesized, while more recent comments recognize sexual harassment, most online viewers rarely indicate the inappropriate nature of Kumamon’s actions and even go as far as condoning or expressing a desire to emulate his behavior. We argue, therefore, that Kumamon’s videos are highly problematic because they not only encourage audiences to view sexual harassment as innocuous and amusing, but they also inspire viewers to take the side of the perpetrator and erase the experiences of victims. In this way, Kumamon’s videos reinforce harmful social norms that silence the victims of sexual harassment. We therefore argue that the conduct of the *yuru-kyara* be more closely regulated so that it does not trivialize and normalize sexual harassment in the Japanese workplace. Furthermore, since this article has demonstrated that sexual harassment remains deeply embedded in workplaces across Japan, we also call for the creation and implementation of nation-wide guidelines on sexual harassment.

Nevertheless, the emergence of comments that condemn Kumamon’s behavior, refer to it as sexual harassment or *sekuhara*, and call for him to be reprimanded, suggests that his videos may also, albeit indirectly, be contributing to local and transnational feminist efforts to break the silence around sexual harassment and hold perpetrators to account. Indeed, since 2019, the videos have become a space in which users have begun to openly debate what constitutes sexual harassment and emphasize why it must be taken seriously and criminalized. This finding is significant because it indicates the emergence of an online feminist movement against sexual harassment in Japan, a movement which is yet to be given considerable attention within academic literature.

Our article has also pointed to a lack of literature that explores how Japanese audiences are influenced by mediated sexual harassment. It is essential that future research builds on our findings and considers the broader influence of mainstream and social media on Japanese perceptions of sexual harassment. Such research should inform media practice in Japan so that the media can effectively condemn sexual harassment and perpetuate the message that it is a violation of human rights and can be considered as an act of violence (Sultana 2012). Only then, would Japanese society, and others beyond their borders, reject victim blaming, encourage people to speak out, and inspire resistance.

## Notes

1. To refer to Kumamon's actions that correspond to academic definitions of sexual harassment, this article uses the term "cheeky" for brevity (Kaibin and Tan 2020).
2. Comments have been translated into English by co-author Helen Pang who was awarded the JLPT N2 qualification and has worked as a Japanese to English translator.

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