What has cat ears, homework, and a love for *bishie*? A Look at Manga's Readership

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A high school girl bounces down the sidewalk with her notebooks covered with *kawaii* stickers of Hello Kitty and her favorite *bishonen*. Her cat ears perk up; her tail swishes beneath her plaid skirt. Her friends, sporting ribbons, skirts, and knee-high stockings, stop her and flash their latest black and white contraband: manga.

In the United States, manga lacks the wide audience it enjoys in Japan. About 75% of manga’s American readership are girls aged thirteen through seventeen (Goldstein and Phelon, 2009). Girls rank reading and checking out manga as their fourth most important use for a library (Agosto, *et al*, 2007). Boys in Agosto’s survey (2007) were more interested in computer game codes; manga does not appear on their lists. As adolescents, manga’s readers face the challenges of developing identities and mastering social skills needed for adulthood. Like young adult literature, manga plays an important role in this process. First, we need to look at exactly what manga is before we can properly understand its readers.

**What is Manga?**

Japanese comics, called manga, are a part of American pop culture. Introduced to the United States between 1970 and 1980, manga has become a lucrative market (Ito, 2005). *Barnes*
and Noble along with Borders provided 75% of manga publisher Tokyopop’s sales in 2007 (Prough, 2010). Manga has a much longer history. Its roots can be traced to caricatures found on one of the oldest wooden building in the world, Horyuji Temple. A monk known as Toba (1053-1140) wrote one of the first "comic strips" that depicted humorous pictures of animals that parodied the upper classes of the time. Manga did not start developing into the form we know today until ukiyoe was born. Ukiyoe is folk art that uses woodblock printing. It was designed to reach a wide audience inexpensively. The most famous ukiyoe artist, Katsushika Hokusai, coined the word manga and published the first with Hokusai Manga. The Hokusai Manga was a collection of caricatures that criticized the ruling classes (Ito, 2005; Adams, 1999). Manga became widely popular after World War II with artists like Osamu Tezuka, Eiichi Fukui, and Shigeru Sugiura laying the foundations for modern manga (Ito, 2005).

Unlike American comics, manga has a wide range of genres. Manga is characterized by the audience it targets. Shonen targets teen boys; shojo caters to teen girls. Two more genres include josei shojo and seinen.

Seinen is manga written for adult audiences. It tends to be
male oriented and has similar, if more graphic, storylines as *shonen*. *Josei* is a new branch of manga. Once considered a sub-genre of *shōjo*, it has become a genre to itself. Ogi (n.d.) defines *Josei* as a genre that reflects the difficulties of women’s lives; it deals with adult issues such as marriage, sex, balancing work and family, and other problems women face in adulthood.

Manga subjects range from slice of life stories to science fiction. There are even educational manga that teach algebra and physics. Figure 1 shows an example page from *Manga Guide to Linear Algebra*. This type of manga focuses on breaking down a concept like linear algebra while still telling a small story to retain the student’s interest. Unfortunately, the West associates manga with violence and sex. Some adult oriented manga feature extreme violence and sexuality. However, manga generally focuses more on character development and traits such as loyalty to friends, intelligence, beauty and cuteness (also known as *kawaii*). One popular *shonen* title involves a boy training in the Japanese board game Go (Lent, 2004).
Manga's Visual Language

Manga is not easy to read. It has its own visual language that combines with Japanese culture. The combination makes reading it a frustrating experience. Unlike western books, manga is read right to left and back to front. Some publishers flip manga so it is read left to right. Manga fans prefer the traditional format over this format. This is attested by the prevalence of unflipped scanlations found online (Rampant, 2010). Scanlations are scanned pages of manga that fans translate. Because of the preference for right to left reading among fans, the majority of manga keeps its original format.

Manga is read quickly. As Lent (2004) writes, a 320 page manga can be read in about twenty minutes. Manga is designed to be a cinematic experience. Figure 2 provides an example. Notice how the page layout is irregular to encourage a more movie-like reading. The layout is also fairly complex. What panel do we read next? The focus on visuals lends manga its
difficult readability. Manga features tight relationships between images and text that requires a complex visual reading to keep the narration cohesive. There are often distorted or extra images used to advance a mood rather than further the narration (Adams, 1999).

Many visual themes in manga can strike a western reader as odd. A girl walks by a male character just as the wind catches her skirt. In the next panel, the poor boy spurts a fountain of blood from his nose. What does that mean? Why would a skirt blowing in the wind make a boy hemorrhage from his nose? Why does the girl later in the story give an OK gesture to a friend at the mall? A new manga reader will not associate a nose bleed with a teenage boy getting sexually excited or the OK gesture with money. The nose bleed is comedic shorthand exclusive to manga; the OK gesture is a cultural hand sign for money. There are other gestures common to manga such as holding up the pinkie finger to refer to one's girlfriend (Rampant, 2010). Manga features other shorthand that can be misunderstood. A blank panel denotes the passage of time. Extreme character deformations provide comedy or portray emotion. A character can spontaneously sprout cat mouths and fangs. Snot balloons pop out of a sleeping character's nose. Characters randomly fall over when someone says something silly. All of this shorthand is used to convey
the character's thoughts, emotions, or states of being. Without an understanding of this shorthand, reading manga can be an odd venture.

Manga leverages the Japanese language in ways English cannot completely parallel. It heavily uses onomatopoeia that serves as actual words in the Japanese language. For example, *shiiin* is used for silence. These words are left in an English translation with footnotes to save money (Rampant, 2010). Honorifics, verbal ways of denoting respect, are left intact in many translations. This is most common with scanlations. Manga readers want the experience to be as authentically Japanese as possible.

Like young adult literature, manga is written to address the difficulties of adolescence. Manga provides a unique lens to understand the developmental needs of teens. We will examine manga's readership and provide a framework for libraries interested in reaching out to this readership.

Manga's Readers
The teenage years are critical years for developing a sense of identity and social skills. There are six chief aspects to the formation of adolescent identity: developing an identity with physical changes, developing a gender identity, independence from parents, acceptance or rejection of adult values, growing into the role of the adult worker, and developing friendships (Feinstein, 2006). Parrot (1994) explains that identity develops through contrasts and rebellion. Identity is established by identifying with a particular literary or media idol. Additionally, identity is established through group membership (Parrot, 1994). Girls, in particular, need room to safely explore different sexual roles, gender roles, and their growing interest in romantic relationships (Goldstein and Phelan, 2009).

Teens cope with drastic body changes. These changes make teens feel self-conscious and sometimes ugly. They complicate emerging identities because people change their reactions toward the teen. An adolescent may look like an adult, but emotionally they are not ready for adulthood. This contrast creates tension in an adolescent’s self image. This is further compounded when people assign adult responsibilities the teen is not ready for, or when adults continue to treat a teen as a child.
Japanese fashion explores the tension a teen feels about their emerging adulthood. Many Japanese fashion styles play with elements from childhood mixed with adult styles. For example, a floral dress normally worn by a young girl may have a lower neckline on a teen. Additionally, the fashion found in manga allows a teen to stand out from their peers such as the teen wearing cat ears and a tail. This fashion style is called *nekomimi* (Japanese for "cat ears"). Style is important for establishing a sense of self. The clothing may be modeled after their favorite manga character or Japanese pop idol. Interestingly, what sets a teen apart from their peers also makes them part of a group. A sense of belonging is just as important as feeling different (Parrot, 1994). Many enjoy dressing or cosplaying (short for "costume play"). This shift in identity can help a teen explore a different role and personality. For many teens, both cosplay and Japanese fashion are ways to feel independent from their parents. Female manga readers often identify themselves as a group of their own because comics in the United States are targeted at adolescent boys (Goldstein and Phelan, 2009). This clique could explain why only a quarter of manga's readership are boys.

Reading manga can be a form of rebellion. Japanese culture has different attitudes toward sexuality than the United States. The exposure to Japanese views on sexuality ties into the
acceptance or rejection of adult values that Feinstein (2006) describes. The views are very
different from the typical American values. For example, nudity is sometimes used for comedy.
Contrast this to American values where nudity is considered a taboo subject. Learning as much
as they can about manga and Japanese culture can help a teen feel separate from their parents.
Few parents know anything about manga and Japanese culture. This difference in understanding
helps a teen feel like they are establishing an identity and knowledge about the world that sets
them apart from their parents. It helps them explore possibilities that may not be accessible in
their native culture.

Like characters in young adult literature, manga characters wrestle with the same
difficulties of discovering an identity. These characters face the difficulties of clique conflict.
They allow a teen to identify with someone going through similar life experiences. This helps
adolescents know they are not alone in their difficulties. Literary characters provide a safe area to
explore solutions to difficulties teens face.

Manga readers are engaged readers. They enjoy drawing and translating manga. A few
moments on popular social art networks show just how engaged manga readers are. DeviantArt
and Elfwood’s art mostly consist of fan art or original artwork drawn in the manga style. You can find many pages of fan fiction manga and original manga on these sites; manga readers enjoy writing unique storylines to explore how their favorite characters will act in different situations.

Writing and translating manga is a way to explore the adult work world. Some teens will aspire to become mangaka (manga authors). Scanlations require regular work and planning to meet deadlines. They require a fair understanding of the Japanese language including hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Scanlators have accountability with fellow manga fans similar to how adults have accountability to their peers. Writing and publishing manga or scanlations require dedication and planning. All of which help prepare adolescents for work.

Manga spans the scope of Japanese civilization. This span gives manga readers a lush landscape to enjoy. Manga readers are interested in Japanese folklore, festivals, traditional and sub-cultural clothing, food, and other aspects of Japan. Even former Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso focused on promoting Japanese culture through its pop culture (Prough, 2010). Manga readers may be interested in learning about ukiyoe prints. These same readers may want to learn how to create art in traditional Japanese styles. Perhaps, they will want a poster of
Hokusai's art for their room. Manga pulls from the rich mythology of Japan and China. Reading manga may further spark interest in the engaged reader to understand the folklore in their favorite series.

Manga readers have a large range of interests that mangaka work to address. The many genres and subgenres we examined (shōjo and shonen among a few) speak to the wide range of backgrounds and ethnicities found in teens. Because 75% of manga's readership are girls (Goldstein and Phelon, 2009), we will see what characteristics they share through the lens of shōjo.

Shōjo comics focus on character development and relationships more than the story and action oriented shonen. Adolescent girls begin focusing upon their own character development and relationships. Shōjo offers a safe area to explore different identities and possibilities. Adolescent girls face difficulties with their bodies changing and accepting those changes. She has to navigate the cliques that provide high school social identities as Parott (1994) describes. Shōjo provides characters that are going through similar problems. Manga
readers turn to manga for escape and to explore possible solutions to their own problems (Ogi, n.d.).

*Shojo* authors are almost entirely women aged teen to late twenties (Prough, 2010). This ties back into Feinstein's (2006) list of teen identity challenges; a teen will often turn to someone who is close to their own peer group for advice. This emphasizes the effort to be more independent from parents. Since *shojo* authors are close to their own peer group, many teen girls will turn to the genre for advice and help.

Girls, even more than teenage boys, wrestle with their sexual and gender identities. One sub-genre of *shojo* specifically addresses these issues and serves as a guide into this conflict. Originating as fan fiction, *yaoi* was written by teen girls until being formally published in 1970 (Zanghellini, 2009). *Yaoi* is an acronym for "yama-nashi, ochi-nashi, imi-nashi" (no climax, no point, no meaning) (McHarry, 2010). This acronym refers to the typical structure of the stories. Also known as Boys’ Love, *yaoi* is characterized by boys falling in love with each other. Typically, the boys are drawn androgynously. This is done to allow girls to explore many different types of relationships from heteroerosexual couples to gay male couples (Goldstein and Phelan, 2009). She
is able to read the manga in ways that can help her understand her own relationships and friendships. This can be done without the usual gender roles associated with normal heterosexual relationships and other gender trappings.

*Yaoi* tends to be sexually explicit. Sexuality of *yaoi* allows readers to consider relationships that may be taboo to their parents' values and act as a form of rebellion. *Yaoi* helps girls realize that gender is a role as opposed to being a law; it helps girls open to their often confusing feelings (Goldstein and Phelan, 2009). This can be liberating for a girl dealing with budding sexual desires, relationship difficulties, physical and emotional changes, and insecurities culturally associated with being a female.

*Shonen* speaks to the teenage boys' need for understanding friendships and relationships. For example, *Slam Dunk* is a manga that uses basketball to explore how the main character grows in popularity with girls and becomes a part of the team, improving himself in the process (Drummond-Matthew, 2010). Like girls, boys seek to develop an identity. Boys are more drawn to the hero story than girls. *Shonen* follows the hero model Joseph Campbell outlines in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, it often uses normal high school situations. Campbell's archetypes are
beyond the scope of our discussion, but it is important to note that *shonen* follows these
archetypes because of their appeal and influence on the manga readership's psychology. Manga,
in general, focuses more on the developmental phases of the hero in Campbell's (1978) structure
than the later phases. It focuses upon all the steps and trials it takes for a young boy to become a
man; manga masculinity is defined by heart and perseverance (Schwartz, 2006). Like girls, boys
use this extended character development to help them sort out their own issues. Boys are
concerned with growing into the role of a worker and developing friendships. They are
particularly concerned with being loyal to their friends and teams. Manga writers speaks to this
by focusing on concepts of loyalty, intelligence, and beauty (Lent, 2004). *Shonen* helps boys find
a path toward manhood and outlines values that can help them beyond that threshold. *Shonen*
has a theme of awkward love interest that rarely come to fruition. The frustration of the
protagonist (and his confusion) with his love interest, who is usually a friend, mirrors that of a
teen boy's. The outlet can help him understand his own problems and even laugh at them.

Both teenage boys and girls use manga's language as a part of their own. The language
helps identify them as part of the group. It is not unusual to see male manga fans hold up their
pinkie when speaking about their girlfriends. They use their understanding of Japanese pop
culture to set themselves apart from the American adult world. More importantly, manga’s visual language changes how they digest information. Understanding manga requires a complex interplay of cultures, identities, texts, and literacies along with expanding the ability to rapidly understand graphical information (Schwartz, 2006). Essentially, manga fans read and understand differently from normal readers. Schwartz (2006) attests that manga readers become experts of multimodality: the ability to incorporate many different ways of processing information at one time. Manga readers are accustomed to reading in nonlinear ways; manga often has panels that add to mood but not to the narration. Schwartz (2006) suggests manga could be used to develop students’ ability to read visual texts analytically and critically. Manga readers tend to have better developed multidimensional thinking than traditional readers because of the complex cinematic language of the medium.

Manga readers are comfortable with seeing different languages and looking up the meanings of words. They are more aware than the general teen reader about cultural differences between countries. Japanese culture has many aspects that are very different from American culture. Manga readers, accustomed to these differences, can fluidly move between cultural contexts. The Japanness of manga is one of the reasons why readers enjoy it (Prough, 2010).
Let us take a moment to summarize the characteristics of manga readers we explored.

Both boys and girls struggle to find their sense of identity in light of their changing bodies, emotions, and social contexts. They need a safe place to experiment and explore possible identities and values. Both boys and girls need guidance but also a feeling of independence from parents. Manga readers are interested in Japanese culture and language; they are engaged readers that write their own manga and alternatives to published manga. They help translate manga for other readers. They enjoy drawing their favorite characters; cosplay is an interest. Both girls and boys identify with character development and make connections with their own life experiences. Girls need an environment where they can explore relationship dictonomies free from gender roles and expectations. They seek guidance from their peer group and their "older sisters" that write manga. Boys are drawn to Campbell's (1978) hero narrative structure, and how it illustrates the development into adulthood. Boys are concerned about their developing masculinity and loyalty to their friends and teams. They are concerned about how to establish relationships with girls; this leads to frustration and confusion. Finally, both male and female manga fans read differently from traditional readers. They are comfortable with cultural references, complex visual readings, and dynamic plots.
What Does this Mean for the Library?

Considering the sometimes controversial content of manga and the characteristics of the manga reader, how can a library meet the demands? Some of the most obvious actions include forming a teen manga club and expanding the library's collection. A good collection will include a core selection of complete manga series (which can be difficult since some series can have one hundred volumes or more) and a selection of media focused on the Japanese language, folklore, myths, culture, fashion, and food. How-to-draw and manga art books are good choices as well. A few Japanese language manga (with their English versions) will help the readers who want to teach themselves Japanese. The core collection of manga should be authentic, right-to-left reading books; otherwise, there will be complaints! As Bergin (2005) was surprised to discover when she surveyed her library, even teens with special education needs are not thwarted by the right-to-left reading style. Subscriptions to weekly manga magazines such as *Weekly Shonen Jump* are relatively inexpensive ways to keep fresh content coming. Despite most manga readers being female, they like to read *shonen* stories in addition to *shojo* (Ito, 2005). Providing *shonen* manga collections and *Weekly Shonen Jump* is important to keep the male side of the readership from feeling left out. However, *Weekly Shonen Jump* is a digital publication.
What should be in this collection? Manga readers are the best source. They may be hesitant at first, but teens want and need to have their voices heard (Brehm-Heeger, 2007). Once they realize the library will consider and act on their suggestions, readers will start offering more and perhaps different ideas. Here, the library needs to be careful. While it is not our job to censor information, we can offend parents enough for them to call for the removal of some or all of the collection. A similar event happened in San Bernardino California where the county library system had to pull thirteen copies of "Manga: 60 Years of Japanese Comics" because of explicit sexual content (Reid, 2006). Yaoi will eventually be suggested by the female reader. While not all yaoi contains explicit sex scenes, many do. It is up to the librarian to decide if the content is too explicit for the community's mores.

The collection should include English-Japanese dictionaries and other media. Japanese myth encyclopedias are a good choice. Biographies about mangaka, "coffee table" manga art books, and a few books about Japanese cooking are good options. Christopher Hart provides very good how-to-draw books about many different aspects of manga.
Although we have not discussed anime, manga readers tend to watch this form of Japanese animation. Like manga, anime may cause problems depending on the community.

There are several anime that are considered classics and make solid additions to the collection: "Cowboy Bebop", any (or all) of Hayao Miyazaki's works, "Akira", "Ghost in the Shell", and "FLCL" (pronounced "fooly-cooly"). Some other options include 'Fruits Basket" and "Naruto."

It is useful to have both the manga and anime for a series. Some educational manga are a good addition for homework help. I provide a short list of anime, manga, and other materials of interest at the end of this discussion. The list is simply a starting point.

It is best to keep the collection together in a special section of the library. Teens need to have a place of their own. They will more likely pick up a book on Japanese mythology if it is close to a manga of "Kekkaishi" in order to understand some of the manga's odd monsters. A few notes about where to find other books about Japan in more appropriate sections of the library will help teens learn how to navigate the stacks. Hanging few manga posters and *ukiyo-e* prints nearby will help draw attention.
A manga club is a good way to serve a group that libraries struggle to reach (Brehm-Heeger, 2007). There are some issues beyond the obvious problems of drama and rambunctiousness. Feinstein (2006) accounts that leisure activity plays a significant role in the formation of teen identity, reinforcing behavior and shaping new behavior. Youth clubs, Feinstein (2006) discovered, tend to draw teens who are from low socio-economic and income families. They tend to have poor school records. With this in mind, it is important that a manga club have an organized structure as opposed to the typical youth club - one that the teens manage and organize themselves. This requires a librarian to structure the program's goals, events, and meetings. The guidance is necessary to provide an educational environment that helps prevent the reinforcement of habits that can lock a teen into problems associated with low socio-economic status: criminal activity, smoking, truancy, low income, and other problems (Feinstein, 2006). Feinstein (2006) emphasizes that structured leisure groups are associated with positive lifetime habits.

Club meetings can include writing and drawing original manga, watching anime, playing video games, cosplay competitions, and trips to conventions. Cosplay competitions include two competitions: a costume competition and a skit. A few rules will need to be laid down: no nudity,
real weapons, or fireworks. Judging of costumes is based upon creativity and accuracy of
costume. Skits are two to five minutes long and judged as part of the costume competition or
separately. Winners can be awarded the right to represent the club in the next convention they
attend.

Another idea is to have club members draw and write their own manga to add to the
collection. Of course, the library will have to reproduce the artwork and collate it before it can be
available for loaning. The club can create new posters for the manga area each month. The club
may help the librarian select titles by making suggestions or voting on the librarian's picks.

Weekend activities can include Japanese cooking lessons, XBox or Wii tournaments, all night
anime marathons, sculpy charm workshops, lolita fashion shows, and kawaii craft days. The last
three workshops are more specifically targeted for girls. These workshops can allow them create
their own unique fashion statements.

As we have seen, manga plays an important role in many teens' lives. They need a safe
environment that helps them develop an identity and explore relationships. Like other forms of
young adult literature, manga provides that safe environment. The program I outlined provides a
framework for a library looking to start serving this readership. I touched on some of the
problems a library may run into with the sometimes explicit content in manga. Manga readers
are an important group that allows libraries to serve a normally difficult to reach audience.

Manga readers, as adolescents, have many developmental needs outside the usual school related
needs. Libraries can become an important part of how they grow into adulthood.

Suggested Collection Materials

-Anime-

Sunrise.

Follows the misadventures of space bounty hunters as they try to keep their stomachs
filled. The cast includes a genetically engineered dog, an ex-gang member, an ex-cop, a
gambler, and a genius hacker.

Mizuo, Yoshimasa (Producer), & Oshii Mamoru (Director). (1995). Ghost in the Shell. Tokyo,
Japan: Production IG.

Set in the far future where many people are cyborgs, this crime thriller follows Section 9's
efforts to capture a hacker known as the Puppet Master. Some scenes may be considered sexually explicit or violent.


This wild ride follows 12-year-old Naota Nandaba as he meets the weird and mysterious Haruko. Haruko fights against a company known as Medical Mechanica; the company seeks to conquer the galaxy. Contains sexual innuendo.


A dystopian Tokyo pits teen biker, Tetsuo, against his biker gang as Tetsuo tries to release the powerful psychic Akira from prison. Tetsuo has the same psychic abilities as Akira, who destroyed Tokyo in the past. Contains violence.

*Manga*

Follows the adventures of Naruto Uzumaki as he grows into the role of a ninja and discovers a hidden secret within himself.


Provides "same day" issue releases as the Japanese version. Features newest chapters to current manga series. This is a digital publication.


High School student Tohru is used to fending for herself. She soon finds a home with a classmate and his cousins who live with a curse: they turn into zodiac animals whenever hugged by the opposite gender or under stress.

*Other Materials*

A look at Japanese culture in small digestable sections with many photographs. Debunks myths about the Japanese people and answers the most common questions people have about their culture.


Another good beginner's guide to drawing in shonen manga style.


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