

# Young voices from a precarious Japan

A qualitative study on young educated women's  
experiences of their life situations  
and perception of the future in Japan

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*“As a young person, I have this anxiety about what I can do in the future, because the future is very unstable and unseen. That is how I feel about my future, that is how I have anxiety about my future.”*

## Abstract

Recent generations of Japanese youth face a diminished and precarious labour market and are pushed to the anxious margins of the society. Many are feeling less secure about the future and this precarisation is disproportionately affecting women. The social and economic precariousness is being intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic and this change of circumstances affect women to a larger extent. The aim of the thesis is to shed light on young women's vulnerability in Japan by asking the question how they experience their circumstances of life and perceive their future. Drawing on the concept of *precariousness*, the thesis conducted a *critical discursive psychology* analysis by looking at which *interpretative repertoires* and *subject positions* that can be identified from the interviewees' accounts. The analysis illustrated how more gendered interpretative repertoires could be identified in the narratives and how different aspects of the interviewees' lives are more precarious, but they are still confident about their own capacity to manage their lives. Anxiety over the future is also prominent and the identified subject positions are mostly 'troubled' or resistant. Depending on the social context, some ('troubled') subject positions result in a more precarious condition.

Keywords: young women, precariousness, vulnerability, Japan, critical discursive psychology, interpretative repertoires, subject positions

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## Abbreviations

CDP:	Critical Discursive Psychology analysis
DP:	Discursive Psychology analysis
NEET:	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
STEM:	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

# 1. Introduction

The topic discussed in this thesis revolves around how young Japanese educated women experience their life situations and perceive their future seemingly amidst an increasingly precarious society in Japan. This study is based on 13 semi-structured online interviews with 14 young university women between February and March 2021. By using *critical discourse psychology* analysis, I aim to identify what *interpretative repertoires* and *subject positions* the interviewees draw on, deploy and embrace in their accounts when they try to make sense and evaluate topics and questions related to their life situations and different aspects of their lives.

This thesis finds its motivation from my time living in Japan between 2016-2018. Talking to many young women, as well as experiencing being a woman in the Japanese society myself, has made me more curious and determined to raise awareness of women's vulnerability in Japan. These experiences planted the seeds which eventually led me to write this thesis.

## 1.1 Background

The question is always, why gender studies, and why gender studies in the context of Japan? Japan has often been criticised internationally for the lack of gender equality (Kitada and Harada 2019, p. 1). What is noticeable is how the Japanese society today has become more punctuated with the upsurge of replaceable workers and employment, emergence of the phenomenon of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) and hikikomori (social withdrawal) among the youth. More people are feeling lonely and excluded, and are struggling to get by (Allison 2013, p. 8). Unlike the generations during Japan's economic miracle in the late twentieth-century, recent generations face a diminished and precarious labour market, and many are pushed to the anxious margins of society. Based on young peoples' precarious social and economic positions, they are referred to as the 'lost generation' of precarious youth (Smith 2018, p. 81).

Social and economic precariousness is being intensified by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, as seen for instance in the escalated suicide rates in Japan. Government statistics has shown that suicide has claimed more lives in October 2020 than Covid-19 has over the entire year of 2020. The pandemic appears to have disproportionality increased the suicide rates among Japanese women (Wang et al. 2020). Study by Nomura et al. (2021) suggests how women are experiencing a greater suicide burden from Covid-19 than men. Reduction in the number of



female workers may reflect the uncertainty of their employment contracts, sex discrimination in decisions regarding layoffs, and more pressure for women to take on caring roles as schools and elderly care facilities are closed. This change of circumstances is likely to adversely affect women, as they are the ones who often carry a disproportionate responsibility for household management (p. 3). What this tells us is that women are experiencing a double bind and women are more exposed to vulnerable and precarious situations in the wake of the pandemic. As women are often overrepresented when it comes to precarious work and insecure livelihood, there is an aspiration to understand how young women in Japan are currently experiencing their life situations and perceiving their future prospects. Moreover, young women in Japan today are facing even more precarious life situations where, earlier studies show (see Shirahase 2015; Endo 2019; Emmott 2020), older ‘scripts’ for creating a good life seem increasingly less desirable and applicable. Persistent gender norms in the society, the pandemic hitting women especially hard and gender equality progressing slowly, all seemingly contribute to a more precarious future for young women in Japan.

## 1.2 Research questions

Given this apparently current and intensified precarious situation for women, this thesis asks the question of how young Japanese women experience their life situations and perceive their future. Against this backdrop the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How do young Japanese women who live and study in Japan experience their life situations and perceive their future prospects?

The sub-questions draw upon the analytical framework of the study, i.e., *critical discursive psychology* (CDP) and some of its key concepts, and are formulated as follows:

2. How do these young women *subject position* themselves in relation to the dominant gendered *interpretative repertoires* that are available for social identity and sense making?
3. To what extent can the *subject positionings* adopted by the young women be seen as ‘troubled’ or resistant?

### 1.3 Significance and academic contribution

Gender studies in Japan is not yet well entrenched compared to other disciplines. Gender studies was, however, an intense academic and political topic from 1990s into the early 2000s in Japan. Yet, its prominence seems to have decreased and the focus has shifted to economic disparity and demographic crisis (Kano 2015, p. 88). To study precariousness among young Japanese women contributes important aspect to the gender research field. What is of significance is the uncovering of the experiences and perception of life situations among the young generation of Japanese women, as it builds on the feminist critical engagement that calls attention to women's vulnerability (Ritu 2013, p. 122). Today's young generation of Japanese are often called the 'lost generation' of precarious youth (Smith 2018, p. 81), and the pandemic seemingly has made it worse. There is extensive research on vulnerability and precariousness, but it is mostly in the realm of neoliberal capitalism (regarding employment structures, employment dimension). More discussion and research on the subjective individual level of precariousness (feelings and experiences of precariousness) amongst young women in Japan is needed. This thesis will attempt to narrow this gap and contribute to the broader literature of gender and precariousness in Japan. Another significance is the focus on young Japanese university women, as there is more research on precariousness amongst working women in Japan. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate how a seemingly more privileged group of people experience their circumstances of life and perceive their future in a more precarious society. Lastly, the prior use of *critical discursive psychology* (CDP) in this context and topic is limited, which gives more relevance to this study.

### 1.4 Outline of the thesis

The premise for the study has now been established in this introductory chapter, and the remainder of the thesis will thus proceed as follows: an engagement with previous academic literature on the current situation in Japan, with a focus on increased vulnerability and precariousness in the society, followed by a discussion on gender (in)equality in Japan to be presented in chapter 2. Thereafter, the concept of precariousness is conceptualised, with the chosen theoretical analytical framework CDP being mapped out in chapter 3. Subsequently, chapter 4 illustrates the chosen methodology adopted for the thesis. Chapter 5 analyses and discusses the research findings, followed lastly by chapter 6 which concludes the study.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to highlight existing literature on the study of women's life situations and (the lack of) gender equality in Japan, as well as the increased precariousness among young people. The relevant existing literature has to be critically mapped out in order to provide a context as well as illustrating why this thesis topic is worthwhile studying.

### 2.1 Precarious Japan

Japan is an interesting case for the study of precariousness. The growth of irregular employment had already started by the mid-1970s, and the failure in taking notice of this trend resulted in a failed anticipation of growing precariousness in the society among women (especially mothers) and increasingly among Japanese youth (Gottfried 2014, p. 465). Post-war Japan was an era of incredible success with high-paced economic growth and sustained industrial output. However, with the burst of the economic bubble in 1991, Japan faced significant economic recession and stagnation, companies started to downsize, and layoffs and unemployment rose. As the hiring of regular employees fell, irregular workers sharply increased. Since the bursting of the bubble, things have not bounced back. Many express the feeling of no future, and no hope that life will or could improve. Persistent recession means irregular employment for particularly young people and women. With the decline of stable jobs, they live precarious lives (Allison 2013, pp. 29-30, 33, 45-46).

#### 2.1.1 *Precarious youth*

As mentioned, the youth were hit the hardest after the burst of the economic bubble and young workers are still having a hard time attaining regular employment. For those who start out as non-regular workers, the prospects of developing skills and being promoted up the career ladder are distant. There is a high level of anxiety among today's job seekers. Uneasiness persists even among those who have regular jobs, due to everyone feeling less secure about employment. However, what is alarming is how this precarisation is disproportionately affecting women (Osawa and Kingston 2015, pp. 67-69, 77). Japan being an aging population has also meant that young people must face the need to support an increasing number of elderly people during their working years while saving to support themselves in old age (Goodman 2012, p. 170). In addition, for those who fail to enter the core workforce in today's Japan, the employment conditions can be harsh; long hours are expected, labour law violations are widely tolerated, and limited institutional protections and oversight (Toivonen 2013, p. 7). Young people in their

twenties today grew up after Japan's economic heyday in the late twentieth-century, and the economic recession of 2008 has shaped their career prospects. Anxiety is shared by many young adults entering the workforce, as they are trying to establish a career without the security of the lifetime employment that their parents once enjoyed (Aronsson 2015, pp. 4, 62, 203-204, 2018).

The current generation of young Japanese is 'lost in transition' between the culture of security (pre-bursting of the bubble) and the current culture of uncertainty (post-bursting of the bubble). Simply put, young people are still expected to move through the still-normative life course of employment, marriage, and childbirth, but in an altered society where normative gender ideologies may no longer be supported by current institutions (Endo 2019, pp. 168-169). In the Japanese case, some scholars have used the term 'affective malaise' to describe the phenomenon in which there is a sense that 'time has stopped, growth is stagnated, hope no longer exists'. In light of the sudden shift that Japanese society has made from being a universal culture of security to a culture of uncertainty has created the rise of the 'lost generation' in which they experience insecure labour predicaments (Standing 2014, p. 65).

This section provides a context of heightening precarious situations for young people in Japan. It shows how the effect of economic recession can have severe impact on the traditional structure and expectations of obtaining stable livelihood and employment. This additionally illustrates how the current generation of Japanese youth are 'lost in translation'. Despite having 'regular' employment, the sense of security is no longer ensured for the youth, which explains the rise of the phenomenon 'affective malaise'. The next section will address the social context of gender inequality in Japan and how this is connected to an increased precarious circumstance for many women.

## 2.2. Gender (in)equality in Japan

Gender inequality lies at the core of Japan's human capital weakness. Japan has for several years faced increasing criticism for its persistent gender gaps. Despite being a highly developed economy with well-educated women, the percentage of working women in Japan remains low, especially after marriage (Hasunuma 2015, p. 89). The context of Japan shows how a rise in non-regular work coincided with a rising share of women in the labour force. In 2008, over half of Japanese women were in precarious employments, compared to less than one in five men. Gender inequality in Japan is a cultural legacy that has fed into a gendered precariat, where women are concentrated in temporary, low-productive jobs, resulting in one of the highest

male-female wage differentials in the industrialised world. This also highlights a challenge in which more women are experiencing a ‘triple burden’ where they are expected to do most of the household management, expected to labour in the market, and expected to take care for the growing number of elderly relatives (Standing 2014, pp. 60-62).

Soon after taking office in 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared his ambition – ‘Womenomics’ – to improve the situation of the Japanese economy and achieve greater female empowerment. Progress has been made, but considerable barriers remain (Emmott 2020, p. 33). ‘Womenomics’ succeeded in increasing child-care facilities and providing some solutions to issues facing Japanese women, e.g., the dilemma of re-entering work after childbearing. However, despite ‘Womenomics’ being an effort of promoting women’s greater participation, women were also needed to work harder to tackle the low birth rate in the country, which contributes to an increased burden placed on women. Although women’s labour force participation has risen, the Japanese labour market remains a gendered dual system in which mostly male members of the labour force have access to secure employment and benefits in ‘regular’ positions (Kano 2018, pp. 2-6; Yamamitsu and Sieg 2020).

Due to the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, Japanese women are the first who will experience the setbacks. It is evident that those with ‘irregular’ contracts will be the first ones to be laid off (Wilson 2020). Moreover, women’s vulnerabilities do not stop here. The disconnection already starts at school. Women make up nearly half of the nation’s undergraduate population. However, at prestigious universities such as Tokyo University, women consist of around 20 percent of the student population. In 2018, a scandal at Tokyo Medical University unravelled a systematic exclusion and deliberate discrimination of women for years, in order to achieve a target proportion of graduating male doctors. The apparent grounds for this discrimination stemmed from the belief that female doctors take long periods of maternity leave and leave the profession once they have children. To ensure the number of doctors it was thought best to ensure a disproportionate number of male medical students (Rich 2019; Emmott 2020, p. 34). The concern here is how the Japanese society has a persistent and longstanding preference in gender division of labour, grounded in the male breadwinner model. After university education, women are expected to leave the workforce following marriage and childbirth (Honjo 2020, pp. 41-42).

This section has illustrated how despite the efforts of promoting women's empowerment, women are still put in a vulnerable position with increased 'irregular' employment. Moreover, women are pressured by increased burdens and expectations of tackling the current demographic situation and existing gender norms and structures in multiple levels of society in Japan. This has also influenced the rise of a singlehood phenomenon in Japan.

### 2.3 Singlehood in a precarious Japan

More Japanese people are marrying later (or even forgoes marrying) and are postponing childbearing or staying childless (Matsuda and Sasaki 2020, p. 395). Japan and its strong tradition of male-breadwinner and female-homemaker model has intensified the problems for young men in regard to family formation. Not having a regular job makes a Japanese man less attractive as a potential marriage partner. Moreover, marriage in Japan is also part of a 'package'. For women this includes numerous gendered roles and unequal division of household labour. When women marry the expectations are for them to assume a spouse role but also a mother role. They are also expected to care for the husband's parents when they are in need of assistance. The household tasks are very gender segregated and the burden traditionally has been falling overwhelmingly on women. Hence, when men and women consider marriage, they tend to do so in the context of this 'package'. This 'motherhood' makes it especially difficult for a wife to work while the children are young (Piotrowski et al 2015, p. 1043).

Some existing studies of Japanese singlehood have highlighted a recent change in life aspiration of single women due to their increased economic independence. Women seemingly chose their careers over marriage due to their perception of marriage and subsequent family life as a burden (Endo 2019, pp. 169-170). This has also resulted in Japan's rapidly aging population and continuous decline in fertility rate. That the fundamental norm of social relations is still based on gender can thus explain why marriage has become less attractive for young people. This is also tied to the income and employment precariousness many young people face today. Women in particular are more likely to give the loss of freedom as their reason for not marrying. However, due to the persistent structure of gender division of labour and the deep-rooted norm of gender roles in society, individual women are often forced to make a choice: either stay in the labour force or get married and have children (Shirahase 2015, pp. 17, 19).

This presents to us a context in which more women consider forgoing marriage, which often has a traditional gendered expectation, to become more career driven and economically independent. However, the system of male-breadwinner model in the society often times forces women to opt for one or the other. Today, women in Japan have more difficulties to attune to traditional gender norms, and current structures in society still makes it difficult for women to fully be free of gendered expectations.

#### 2.4 Why gender studies of young women in Japan?

This thesis positions itself in how the literature review revealed a shortage of studies in English on specifically young Japanese women's experiences of their life situations and perceptions of the future in a more precarious society. Today's gender research mostly focuses on precariousness in regard to women's employment dimension. Furthermore, plenty of research regarding youth vulnerability or precariousness deals often with Hikimori, NEET or Freeters (people who lack full-time employment or are unemployed excluding students) and not much regarding young educated Japanese women (e.g., Allison 2013; Baldwin and Allison 2015; Goodman 2012; Smith 2018; Inui 2005). Moreover, research on precariousness among youth is often on a non-Japanese context (e.g., Kesisoglou et al. 2018; Figgou 2020; etc.), therefore, much of this part of the world is not much explored. Thus, this thesis attempts to illuminate and fill this gap and move away from the Western context of this research field. There are plenty of different dimensions when it comes to gender and precariousness research, however the subjective individual level of experiences and feelings of precariousness has a significance to the thesis, and the rest, e.g., aiming for generalisation or looking at the structural or societal level of precariousness (e.g., Standing 2011; Kesisoglou et al. 2018) is beyond the scope of the paper.

Based on current literature on the escalating trend of social vulnerability in Japan, assumingly young women are now facing a more precarious life situation and an uncertain future. Therefore, it is crucial to attempt to shed light on the situation, especially now in the wake of Covid-19. Heightening suicide rates among women, limited success of 'Womenomics' and slow improvement towards gender equality tells a story of how the situation for young women in Japan is continuously precarious.

### 3. Conceptualisation and Theoretical Framework

What follows is a discussion of the concept of *precariousness* well utilised in this thesis, and the presentation of the chosen theoretical analytical framework of *critical discursive psychology*.

#### 3.1 Critical gender studies and Judith Butler

Gender studies is important, but it is also complex, and it has often been the target of criticism which required the field to constantly demonstrate its relevance. Lennon and Alsop (2020) emphasise how gender scholar Judith Butler occupies a central position in critical gender studies. Butler is a distinguished scholar, and her research covers a wide range of studies: queer theory, feminist theory and gender studies. However, this thesis will address her work on precarity and precariousness. Butler draws significant attention to our vulnerability relational to others, the precariousness of our existence. We need others to position us in a cultural world so that we can develop and have a sense of that world and ourselves in relation to it (Lennon and Alsop 2020, pp. 151-159; Butler 2012; Butler 2004). Precariousness implies that people live socially and that one's life is always related and dependant on others. That dependency, however, can easily become the mechanism for subjugation. This implies that our basic need for recognition renders us simultaneously vulnerable. The need for inclusion is the vulnerability of those who fail to conform to social norms. What makes us particularly vulnerable to others is our need for recognition by others (Lennon and Asop 2021; Tyler and Vachhani 2021, pp. 252-253). However, Butler also designates that precariousness is also a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009, p. 322) Butler's aim with this statement is to contribute to political change. However, rather than focusing on political mobilisation and political change, the conceptualisation of precariousness for the thesis will be established in the following sections.

#### 3.2 Precarity vs precariousness

Precarity is a concept picked up by European social and labour movements in the 1970s, and it often relates to the shift of capitalism toward more flexible and irregular work. At its foundation, precarity refers to conditions of work that are precarious; “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Allison 2013, p. 6). Precarity is in this sense a deviation from security and refers to a particular notion of work (Allison 2013, p. 6). The meaning of precarity is often contested and there is often a differentiating distinction



made between the understanding of precarity. According to Judith Butler, a critical distinction between precariousness and precarity defines precariousness as a generalised human condition that originates from how all humans are interdependent of each other and therefore are all vulnerable. Precarity on the other hand is different because it deals with unequal distribution. It is experienced by marginalised, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, violence, forced migration etc. (Kasmir 2018).

Previous and current research has often inquired about economic and employment precarity, but to a lesser extent about the related, subjective experiences of precariousness (Worth 2016, p. 602). According to Gasiukova and Shkaratan (2019), “an individual’s precarious status is characterised by instability originating from a multitude of sources” (ibid, p. 117). Most research investigates precarity based on an individual’s volatile job situation and financial vulnerability, and mostly describe only the employment dimension. However, precarity can also be a “subjective experience of instability” (ibid, p. 117). Simply put, precarity as a phenomenon should not be restricted to employment relations. It should also be characterised as a phenomenon beyond the scope of the labour market and the different forms of employment (ibid, p. 118).

### *3.2.1 Conceptualisation of precariousness – generic terminology*

Many scholars use precarity and precariousness interchangeably. Cultural anthropologists studying precariousness focus on emotion and subjectivity, exploring displacement and uncertainty (Kasmir 2018). Allison (2013) interprets precariousness as a sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected, a sense of an insecure life (p. 14). Worth (2016) is also examining the more individual subjective experiences of precarity – feeling precarious. Similar to Worth’s, Allison’s and cultural anthropologists’ research, this thesis is more inclined and interested in the individual, subjective level of experienced and perceived feelings of precariousness; feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, instability and displacement. Therefore, the generic term of precariousness will be understood in this fashion from this moment on.

### *3.3 Critical discursive psychology as a theoretical tool of analysis*

In the previous section, the generic term of the concept precariousness used in this thesis is established. As the focus is on the individual subjective experiences of young women’s life situations and their perceptions of the future, *critical discursive psychology* (CDP) can serve as a suitable theoretical tool of analysis to guide the study. CDP is a form of discursive psychology

analysis (DP). The reason why the thesis has elected to not use DP is that the focus of the framework of DP is on how attitudes are formulated in talk: their format and their rhetorical impact. CDP is arguably more interesting to this study due to its focus on how topics are thought to be relevant from a broader cultural or social perspective. CDP is also less concerned with the sequential aspects of talk, which DP is more concerned with. The difference between the two is how CDP draws on the importance on how words are drawn on wider social meanings and make them relevant in the here and now (Wiggins 2017, pp. 41-46). As CDP views discursive practices as socially situated and combines analysis of conversations with an examination of broader socio-cultural context (Charlebois 2014, p. 25), this framework is deemed more interesting for this study as CDP has not extensively been applied to the topic and context this thesis tries to investigate.

Charlebois' (2010) own gender research on Japan's femininities uses CPD. This framework not only views language as a window into people's minds, but also considers text and talk as actively constructed to perform specific rhetorical actions (e.g., construct arguments, justify actions, attribute blame). When individuals construct accounts, they draw from a stockpile of pre-existing, culturally available conversational routines or *interpretative repertoires* – coherent ways people talk about a topic and issue. These interpretative repertoires are actively deployed by individuals as they discuss, argue, and evaluate actions and events (p. 700). These interpretative repertoires exist in the wider culture rather than as individual 'beliefs' and have a sense of 'out-thereeness' which transcends any particular instance of talk. CDP is especially interested in how people 'speak themselves and others into being' by drawing on culturally available meanings (Donaghue 2018, pp. 135, 139).

Another concept used in CDP is *subject position*. Subjectivity within post-structuralism is a concept about a person's sense of self. The concept of subjectivity is built upon a certain understanding of the relation between the sense of self and a social context. People are not reproducing one dominant notion of the 'personne' or acting out one homogenous cultural personality, but they are actively engaged in their lives (Staunaes 2003, pp. 103). In social interactions, people create subject positions for themselves and others. Language is crucial to identity because it is central to the creation of expectations about how others and ourselves should behave, or can show resistance to expectations. Subject positions are either disputed or accepted as people have to explain, defend, or abandon them in the face of others' resistance (Phoenix et al. 2003, p. 180). Some discourses constrain what can be thought, said and done.

Discourses provide different possibilities of interacting and positioning and establish certain subject positions (Staunaes 2003, pp. 103-104). More depth regarding how interpretative repertoires and subject positions can be used as analytical tools will be presented in the methodology chapter.

## 4. Methodological Approach

This chapter will present the chosen research design, a discussion of the study's ontological and epistemological positioning, what methods of data collection are adopted, the analytical methods, and the thesis' limitations, ethical considerations and reflexivity.

### 4.1 Research design

The choice of research design and research methods is of crucial importance. The focus of the study is qualitative, descriptive and inductive in nature, and embraces the social construction and understanding of the world and the worldview of the thesis' participants. This in turn leads to some methods and research designs rendered more suitable than others. Hence, the most suitable research design for this study is a qualitative and descriptive one as the ambition is to attempt to reveal and explore a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of young Japanese women's experiences of their life situations and perception of their future prospects. The choice of most suitable research method for answering the research questions lies in the question of what method can better grasp the subjective perceptions and experiences of the participants. Therefore, *semi-structured interviews* and *critical discursive psychology* analysis are deemed the most suitable methods for this study. Surveys and questionnaires were deliberated upon as potential research methods, however, it was dismissed due to its quantitative and inherent nature in generalising findings to a bigger population (Bryman 2016, p. 173). Moreover, the active decision to adopt a qualitative research design and methods over quantitative ones is rooted in the discussion of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the different approaches. The next section will give a more thorough outline and reasoning of the different debates, and why the qualitative reasoning is the most suitable for how the data is approached for this study.

### 4.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning

The ontological and epistemological positioning of the different research designs – qualitative or quantitative – have a significant impact of what kind of study one wants to pursue. Quantitative research often embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective reality. In contrast, qualitative research presents a view of social reality as a constantly shifting property of individuals' creation (Bryman 2016, p. 33).

The way the research questions are constructed and what this study tries to investigate, the *constructionist* ontological underpinning and an *interpretivist* epistemological positioning deem appropriate. The constructionist ontological standpoint argues that reality is understood, shaped, reconstructed and revised through social interaction. Objectivism in most quantitative research and in survey questionnaires, however, believes that reality is pre-given and is independent of agency. As the essence of this study is to understand young women's experiences of their life situations and perception of the future, reality must then be understood as social phenomenon being shaped by the social interactions and experiences between individuals. In this sense, reality does not exist regardless of agency, but is constructed by the agent in question (Bryman 2016, pp. 33, 375).

The epistemological positioning is the most crucial one. Epistemology is the understanding of what constitutes knowledge and in qualitative research the epistemological positioning is often *interpretivist*, meaning that the stress is put on the understanding of the social world through the examination of the interpretation of the world by the participants. Hence, the empirical data and findings of the thesis are not and should not be considered as a value-free set of facts that leads to knowledge about the objective, ultimate truth (Bryman 2016, pp. 26, 375).

This thesis is mostly explorative in nature. It is inductive since the study lets the data guide and reveal what common themes and accounts emerge, and what interpretative repertoires can be identified in the narratives of the young women's understanding of their life situations.

#### 4.3 Semi-structured interviews

As Brinksmann and Kvale (2015) describe it, a qualitative research interview attempts to comprehend the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their experiences (p. 3). Based on how the research questions are formulated and the aim of the thesis – *semi-structured interview* is the natural fit. In a semi-structured interview, the greater interest is in the interviewees' point of view. Semi-structured interviewing has also become prominent methods of data gathering within feminist research framework, which suits perfectly as the essence of this research is gender studies. The potential of semi-structured interview for feminist research lies in its power in allowing women's voices to be heard and in their own words. Feminist researchers advocate that semi-structured interview give a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee due to its high degree of reciprocity, giving space for the

perspective of the women being interviewed and creates a non-hierarchical relationship (Bryman 2016, pp. 466-468, 488).

Why a semi-structured interview is the most suitable, in comparison to for example a survey, lies also in the probability and ability of execution of this study. A survey requires large amounts of data in order to make it significant. However, due to the pandemic, the possibility for fieldwork is limited. Moreover, as a survey aims for a generalisation of the results, the thesis' ontological and epistemological positioning has a different ambition.

#### 4.4 Critical discursive psychology analysis as an analytical tool

Because the thesis is inductive in nature, one particular analytical tool that is suitable for this kind of study is, as previously mentioned, *critical discursive psychology* (CDP). CDP has both a theoretical and methodological aspect. During the data collection, semi-structured interviews was implemented, but for the analysis of the data however, analytical tools within CDP is used. CDP helps to identify culturally available interpretative repertoires that shape our understanding of a particular topic. It is mostly concerned with the broader patterns of talk across a particular data set, and how the words draw on wider social meanings. Two of the core analytical concepts within CDP is used in this study are *interpretative repertoires* and *subject positions* (Wiggins 2017, pp. 33, 45-48). The reason for using these two specific analytical tools is due to the high suitability of the tools for this thesis' posed main question.

##### 4.4.1 CDP analytical tools

*Interpretive repertoires* are coherent ways of talking about an issue, the patterns in discourse. Discourses are particular ways of talking and representing certain ideas or topics which circulate within a specific society. Discourses are socially shared ways of thinking and speaking about certain topics or objects (people included). Discourse can also shape our subjectivity – influence our thinking and perceptions of the world and our private experiences of self (Donaghue 2018, pp. 132-134). Interpretive repertoires are flexible discursive resources in that they can be used to argue for or against a particular issue. Individuals deploy interpretative repertoires as they discuss, argue and evaluate actions and events. CDP practitioners believe that a range of interpretative repertoires can be drawn at any time, however, some interpretative repertoires are more culturally dominant than others. These dominant interpretative repertoires are established over time and it can be so normative in a culture that it becomes understood as common sense (Wiggins 2017, pp. 45-46). The notion of interpretative repertoire is a detectable

routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations found in people's talk. The interpretative repertoires are the building blocks from which people develop accounts and versions of significant events (Seymour-Smith 2017, p. 114).

When individuals draw on interpretative repertoires, they are also taking up *subject positions*. Everyday conversations provide people with a position to speak from (Seymour-Smith 2017, p. 115). For example, people can think of themselves being part of a certain group of people if they recognise themselves as having similar characteristics as the members of the group (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 157). Discourse offers subject positions or social identities that individuals can affirm or disaffirm, or potentially reconfigure. One example is how dominant discourses in Japan position men as family breadwinners and women as family caregivers. Socio-culturally dominant discourses do not have a fixed masculinity or femininity, but they arguably encourage individuals to construct socially endorsed gendered subjectivities (Charlebois 2014, p. 27). It is possible for individuals to be positioned in contradictory ways as we routinely behave differently with different people, in different contexts. This also means that people can find themselves in 'troubled' subject positions if they have to face contradictions (Phoenix et al 2003, p. 180); Wetherell 1998). Simply put, 'troubled' subject positions are in contrast, constructed as 'inappropriate, destabilised, difficult' in relation to what is considered as normal and preferred in different types of interactions. If you are part of a dominant norm in a specific context, it is possible to talk about yourself in an untroubled manner. You are being 'in sync' with the appropriate discursive category (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 157). 'Troubled' subject positions cover positions that challenge the normativity in certain everyday contexts of lived experiences (Staunaes 2003, p. 104). Subject positions can be disputed or accepted as people have to explain, defend or abandon them in the face of others' resistance. Everyone behaves differently with different people in different contexts, and we can find ourselves in 'troubled' subject positions in the face of contradictions (Phoenix et al. 2003, p. 180).

CDP research does not aim to generate and analyse large samples of data but conducts an in-depth analysis on a relatively small sample. The conclusions may be conditional, applicable to only a particular group of participants. However, at the same time, these small numbers of participants are drawing from socio-cultural context and discourses that circulate and are available to members of Japanese society at large. This may have implications that extend beyond these participants (Charlebois 2014, p. 28).

In the data analysis phase, linguistic ‘traces’ is to be searched for (Charlebois 2010, p. 703). The analysis should be focused on looking for lexical repetition and common themes and issues which emerge in the data. Metaphors can also suggest the presence of interpretative repertoires (Charlebois 2010, p. 703; Kesisoglou et al. 2018). The method is also taking a social constructionist standpoint, which is in line with this thesis’ ontological and epistemological reasoning. There is always a particular version of reality and researchers within CDP are not concerned with the ‘truth’, rather “concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live” (Seymour-Smith 2017, p. 106).

#### 4.5 Qualitative data collection – sampling

Most sampling in qualitative research entails purposive sampling, and one of purposive sampling technique is *snowballing sampling*, which this study is making use of. It is a technique in which the researcher initially samples a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other respondents who have similar characteristics relevant to the research (Bryman 2016, pp. 410, 415). The interviewees chosen for this study are thus based on personal network. Snowballing is the most feasible strategy due to the limitation faced by the pandemic, which makes fieldwork impossible. Therefore, people within my personal network are important gatekeepers (ibid, p. 415).

Some interview subjects may appear better than others, and as a researcher, active choices must be made. However, one has to keep in mind that the ideal interview subject does not exist (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, p. 193). The participants who were introduced are mostly young women who are in their final years of university studies. They come from various university backgrounds, some from prestigious universities in Tokyo and some from other universities in other prefectures. This is important, as choosing interviewees with different university backgrounds gives a more nuanced perspective to the study as people from different university backgrounds might have different experiences and incentives. In total, 11 formal interviews, and 2 pilot interviews were conducted; total of interviews are 13 and 14 interviewees (10 single interviews, 1 group interview and 2 pilot interviews), and all except from one were conducted in English. 13 interviews will give the analysis sufficient data to identify interpretive repertoires and subject positions in the data. The length of the interviews varies, in the appendix can be



found a table attached which presents the time and date of the interviews conducted. Lastly, all interview transcripts are written in English.

Awareness is shown in regard to this type of respondents. Women who are in university could account a difference in life situations and experiences compared to those who have not gone to universities, or those from other minority groups. However, as it has been previously discussed, the aim is not trying to discover an objective truth of reality of all young women in Japan. This thesis' participants might be privileged, but when reading about the possible precarious situation young Japanese educated women could be facing which older Japanese women have been facing for years, I am encouraged to conduct a deeper study. Furthermore, for the feasibility of the study, an active choice has to be made in choosing university students as they are the most accessible respondents due to Covid-19. Moreover, the active choice of only interviewing respondents who have good knowledge of English language is likewise due to my low language skills in Japanese.

#### 4.6 Limitations, ethical considerations and reflexivity

Reflecting on limitations, reflexivity and ethical issues are important as it outlines potential flaws and risks the study must take into consideration. Here, it is important to show awareness of shortcomings of the study itself, and how these can be tackled and subverted. General limitations will first be outlined, followed by ethical considerations and subsequently the reflexivity and the author's positionality in the production of knowledge.

##### *4.6.1 General limitations*

The researcher has to always consider the language as a barrier in which misinterpretation can arise. There are always limitations if the researchers are not fluent in the language in a society they intend to study. There are also the general issues of myself being a Swedish person, conducting interviews in English with Japanese interviewees, based on Western concepts. Therefore, an open dialogue between the researcher and the interviewees have been made. Moreover, some phrases and words in Japanese are difficult to translate into English, and this could also lead to some knowledge and concepts being lost. Therefore, it is essential to exercise self-awareness regarding the differences in understanding of certain words; some concepts might have a different connotation or context based on our personal lived experiences. The possibility of misinterpretation is very much present and will be combatted through the help of native speakers.

#### *4.6.2 Ethical considerations*

The interaction of interviewer and interviewee is laden with ethical issues. One thing that one has to bear in mind is that interviews entail an asymmetrical power relation. The research interview is not an open, everyday conversation between equal partners. Me being a Swedish master's student and interviewer has the power to define the interview situation and determines the interview topic. Moreover, an interviewer has the control of the interpretation over the subject's statements (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, pp. 37-38). Therefore, I am showing awareness to the problem and has attempted to reduce the power asymmetry. During the whole process, efforts to try to create a safe space for the interviewees has been made, so they feel comfortable enough to tell me their honest opinions and answers.

Lastly, the thesis is following the ethical guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2017). The study has received informed consent from the interviewees and has given the interviewees the confidentiality and protection of anonymity. Transparency has to be conducted throughout the research process, and the participants has been informed about the overall purpose of the study and any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, p. 93). As the topics could be perceived as sensitive, I am trying to guarantee sufficient and appropriate measure to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, i.e., make known to the participants that they have all rights to refuse to answer any of the questions or end the interview in case of privacy invasion and that their anonymity will be protected and ensured.

#### *4.6.3 Reflexivity and positionality*

Reflexivity is important in social science research, and researchers have to be reflective about the implications of their methods, values and biases and how these can generate knowledge of the social world. One has to show sensitivity to his or her own cultural, political and social background and context, and how these can have an influence of the knowledge production (Bryman 2016, p. 388). Positionality and reflexivity are important to this study given its epistemological reasoning. The role as researcher, trying to interpret the social reality and perception of young Japanese women has to always be reflected upon. Knowledge and belief of the world is a matter of interpretation, and the necessity to reflect upon my own positioning as a researcher in constructing knowledge through analysed data has importance. The awareness of possible biases is there; my position as a Western, young woman with European values can

have an impact on the research, on my interpretation and understanding of the data collected, and how I make sense of the participants' personal worlds. During the whole research process, I engaged in constant self-reflection in order to minimise the incorporation of my own personal biases and Western normativity. Acknowledging my personal background, culture, knowledge and experiences could lead to a minimized distortion of the knowledge produced. I constantly interrogate my own biases and normative assumptions about the topic raised in this thesis.

With this, we have established the thesis' chosen research design, analytical methods, focus group and its limitation. I will now conclude the methodology chapter and move on to the empirical findings and analysis.

## 5. Empirical Findings and Analysis

The present chapter will begin by going through what common themes and accounts emerge from the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences of their life situations and perception of the future; what kind of accounts are presented which can be interpreted as precarious, and how they perceive their future prospects and other gender issues. Later in the following paragraphs, I will address what kind of interpretative repertoires I have identified and interpreted, as well as delve into the interconnections between related academic literature of the socio-cultural context in Japan and the accounts of the interviewees. As the thesis is very much inductive, the first stage of the analysis was a rough initial analysis right after the interviews had been conducted, followed by what possible common themes emerged from the data. As the analysis method is CDP, we will make use of the two analytical tools: interpretative repertoires and subjective positions.

The next paragraph will be a short presentation of the empirical findings of the interviewees' accounts of their experiences of their life situations and perceptions of the future, followed by a discussion of the main interpretative repertoires which are identified in this study. Lastly, an analysis of detected ('troubled') subject positions will take place.

### 5.1 Empirical findings

The first question asked in this thesis is how young Japanese women experience their circumstances of life and perceive their future. Since the interviewees are university students, most questions asked, and the accounts given during the interviews are related to this aspect. One important common account is related to the interface between the interviewees' experiences as senior students in university and their crucial decision on what to do next in their lives – e.g., integrating into the labour market. These young women can be said to be privileged (some more than others) as they will graduate with a university degree, and thus their chances of getting a 'regular' employment after graduation is higher than others. The common narrative of pursuing a university degree was much due to societal norms, or 'tradition' as some interviewees would describe it. To pursue a university degree was expected of them in order to get a good job or career later in life, and what is described as 'common sense' – everyone (who could) was doing it. Many describe their decision of going to university as related to the feelings of normalcy (the normal path to take) or 'going with the flow'. Some students have claimed a wish to try other things before starting university, but due to rigid social expectations, they elected not to

take any ‘gap years’. Many also went to specific high schools which were only for the preparation of going and applying to universities.

In connection to the existing literature of the socio-context or dominant discourse regarding higher education in Japan, the previous account from the interviewees’ is linked to how the graduate labour market has for decades provided young people with smooth transition from university to working life. Young graduates often find employment quickly, not on competency but rather on ‘trainability’ at the companies. However, the deterioration after the collapse of the ‘bubble economy’ in the 90s has led to more jobless graduates (Yoshimoto and Yamada 2007, p. 100). When university graduates start the job-hunting process, most of the time the job market works with Japanese higher education institutions. In Japan, it is evident that the business community has developed a corporate practice of recruiting a large amount of new graduates on a regular basis. This helps to smoothen the transition of students into the job market (Allen et al. 2007, p. 9). Therefore, for the interviewees the importance of going for university is very much related to this development of relationship between education institutions and the business community. With the state of the Japanese economy, this discourse has been stressed in the society. Getting a university degree in order to find employment is perhaps more important now than ever in order to find a stable job for the future as the labour market is more precarious than before. One interviewee describes:

“[...] many students actually did not go to universities because we want to study, but more like we had to, because we had to take the degree because we can get into good companies if we go to that prestigious school”.

(Respondent 5)

Another common account is related to the interviewees’ perception of their future prospects. The job-hunting process is a crucial chapter of these young women’s lives presently, as it is linked to their future perception. Based on the data of the interviews, almost all of the interviewees describe the feelings of anxiety of achieving a future they desire. The precarious perception of their future is often related to gender inequality. Many wish to attain an employment they are satisfied with which gives them the possibility to pursue a career and to start a family simultaneously. However, most interviewees describe the feeling of anxiety (fuan) of actually being able to achieve their ideal future due to the insecurity caused by gender structures in the society. In connection to current literature of gender studies in the context of Japan, the Japanese society is rooted with beliefs of gender division of labour and gender norms. This has driven employment and working practices to become more gendered; a male

breadwinner model which makes the practice of women staying at home and attending domestic chores common. The statistics are clear, Japanese women's labour force participation rate is lower than Japanese men (women 50,3% versus men 70,5%). A marked drop in Japanese women's labour force participation appears from the fact that 47% of working Japanese women exited into a domestic role after their first childbirth. This striking gender difference is likely to be attributed to the persistent preference and discourse in gender division of labour (Honjo 2020, pp. 39-41). Today, women in Japan are also expected to take numerous roles such as both working and taking care of the household, which increase the burden on women (Standing 2014, p. 62). Against this background, the interviewees emphasise the aspiration and anxiety of receiving employment where they would be able to pursue a career but also fulfill their dreams of having a family, but at the same time the wish to not be burdened with the expected gender roles. Therefore, the job-hunting process is very crucial to them to find good employment which can provide them a good work-life balance.

Some interviewees give the description of how Covid-19 has fuelled the feelings of anxiety and insecurity over their future prospects due to increased difficulties to get employment since some market sectors have disappeared and diminished. This situation has intensified the feelings of precariousness. However, what is interesting to note is how most of the young women agree that the pandemic has provided some positive change to their life situation. To do job-hunting in Japan often entails doing the process on site, mostly in bigger cities e.g., Tokyo and Osaka. With Covid-19, everyone has more equal access to be part of the process – everything is digital. The disparity of people living in the cities and countryside are getting smaller, which improves the life situation for many interviewees.

To have a better grasp of their life situations and future prospects I will go more in depth of what interpretative repertoires can be identified in the accounts of the interviewees in the following sections.

## 5.2 Gendered interpretative repertoires in Japan

The overwhelmingly present interpretative repertoires are related to gender related issues – descriptions of gendered bias when it comes to education, career and future prospects. Commonplace narratives of insecurity and anxiety of the future or their life situations are due to prevalent gender norms in Japanese society. As mentioned, when individuals construct accounts, they draw from culturally available conversational routines – interpretative

repertoires, and people also deploy them when they discuss, argue and evaluate topics, actions and events. It is a set of coherent ways individuals talk about certain topic or issue (Charlebois 2010, p. 700).

### 5.2.1 'Gendered expectations'

One interpretative repertoire identified from the accounts of the interviewees is a gendered one. Based on the linguistic traces and common discussion which emerged in the data, the interpretative repertoire surfaced deals with gender structures. One commonplace pattern of accounts that emerged when asked about their educational experiences was the description of gendered bias in academic pursuits. The young women were asked if they found it easy to get accepted to university, which most of them believe it is. However, those who agreed all study liberal arts or social science related subjects. Interesting enough, those interviewees who study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related fields at university gave an opposite description.

“I study physics and not many females choose to study in natural sciences. I was a minority in choosing that path. I don't think it was easy to choose that path in the first place. [...] I think it was difficult, it was not like a normal path for me to choose to study physics.”

(Respondent 2)

This quotation shows a commonplace pattern from all the accounts which emerged when asked why there are so few women who study STEM related subjects or why scandals such as the Tokyo Medical School case occurs. This is what I identify as a '*gendered expectations*' interpretative repertoire to either study STEM related subjects or to pursue a higher academic degree exceeding bachelor level. The linguistic traces that manifested themselves are often related to expectations of gender roles in the same field. One interviewee evaluates that it is expected “men are doctors and women are nurses and therefore women do not need to try as hard”. Another portrays the trend that female students who study science often pursue a career as assistants to doctors or nurses instead of pursuing their own careers as doctors. The conclusion amongst the interviewees to the situation has much to do with gender norms in the society; only men are expected to study STEM related subjects or advance their studies, or that there is this perception in the society that women are intellectually inferior and cannot understand science or mathematics. Moreover, another states: “if woman is smarter than a man, it will be more difficult for her to get married, and that men want to be in a higher position than women”.

Several of the young women evaluate how this societal worldview creates gendered encouragement. Below are two interviewees who give similar explanations of the situation:

“I think there is like a stereotype that STEM majors are for men somehow. Even in my all-girls high school, a lot of the teachers recommended us to like not to go for STEM, because it might be difficult for us”.

(Respondent 8)

“[...] I feel like our parents have [the] conceptions of girls not really have to study, or not really necessarily have to be smart, but more like they [are] comforting us like ‘[there is] no need to be that good’. You can be decent, but you don’t have to be that good. I think that is also present in this case.”

(Respondent 14)

Interpreting this deployed ‘*gendered expectations*’ interpretative repertoire, shows a feeling of restrictions and hardship for some of the young women. Some interviewees even had the desire to go for graduate school, but societal norms made some of them change their plans. A narrative of insecurity and struggle is described by those women who decided to pursue something different from what is expected. This interpretative repertoire can be understood to be connected to a prevalent discourse or norms in the Japanese society. One interviewee describes how women close to her express the desire to be a housewife and want to marry a man who has ‘high natural science skills’, although her friends themselves study STEM related subjects and had the background and qualification to pursue a career within natural sciences. According to present literature, a dominant socio-cultural context and discourse in the Japanese society shows a huge gender difference in university majors, evidenced by how fewer Japanese women choose to do their degree in STEM fields (Honjo 2020, p. 39). This trend is not new. During the post-war recovery, the process of its national recovery was encouraged by strengthening the fields of STEM. It was the Japanese women however, who devoted themselves to support men’s success in STEM by adopting gender roles as wives and mothers. This has led to, according to Kitada and Harada (2019), the dominant expectation on women today is to be subordinates to men which also reflects the fact that much fewer women are found in STEM fields in Japan. This attitude is embedded in how the institutions of Japanese education and career development generally discourage women from pursuing STEM careers, which are traditionally regarded as unsuitable for women (pp. 1-2). Therefore, we can witness the interviewees’ accounts of struggle in their pursuit for graduate schools or STEM related fields due to this gender-stereotypical norm permeating the Japanese society.



In addition, there is an expectation in the Japanese society in which women are encouraged to as soon as possible enter the labour market to help with the recovery of the country's economy, and at the same time as quickly as possible start a family in order to tackle the demographic problem (see Standing 2014; Emmott 2020; Chanlett-Avery and Nelson 2014). This has made education attainment for women being seen as less important than for men, and women are expected to take on a domestic role after their marriage (Honjo 2020, p. 42). A quotation from one of the interviewees summarise this situation:

[...] when I decided to go to graduate school, I experienced a lot of difficulties because it is not common for women to go to graduate school [...]. I think a lot of people say like women have to go to society faster and marry faster as much as possible.”

(Respondent 7)

### 5.2.2 ‘Female attributes’ and ‘gender equality’

The second gendered interpretative repertoire is named ‘*female attributes*’. One particular event which all young university students in Japan must face is the ‘shuukatsu’ season (job hunting). The job-hunting season is a crucial aspect of the young women’s lives at the moment. The descriptions of their experiences and perceptions of the job-hunting process reveal a gendered interpretative repertoire of the job-hunting system. The anxiety here deals with how the structure of ‘shuukatsu’ can be for many rigid, time consuming and gendered. The linguistic traces that manifest show that in their descriptions, the interviewees felt that they were often judged based on their ‘womanly’ outward appearances and attributes. There is a gendered difference in treatment and the interviewees reveal the frustration of being treated stereotypically. Two interviewees explain:

“I don’t know about the practical experiences or facts, but my friends said that female students should wear high heels or wear scarfs, so it is not fair. I don’t like it. I have a close friend and she was studying for the examination to be a national official [diplomat]. [...] in the interview she was asked by the interviewer who was a man, and he said ‘what [would] you do if you get married or what [would] you do if you get pregnant?’ After that, she cancelled [the process]. Moreover, I have many feminist friends, and one of my friends he is a feminist and studying journalism. He is right now in the job-hunting period. [...] this year, so many gender-based issues and feminist issues are happing in journalism or mass media world, so he felt he can’t say he is a feminist. So, he is trying to hide he is feminist, [and this] is wrong.”

(Respondent 6)

“[...] even job hunting it is tough for women. Many companies still have, you know, try to have men because they don’t get pregnant, so they don’t quit companies. [...] Women have to take pretty pictures for the resumé and not so many men.”

(Respondent 4)

What is interesting is how the *'female attributes'* interpretative repertoire comes with discursive tensions. Most of the interviewees express the frustration of the existing structure but there is no desire or attempt to want to challenge the discourse. As one respondent accounts:

“There are so many difficulties. I’ve come to accept most things by now, in the beginning of last year in April, I was really questioning the whole system. Why do we need to like have a professional photo taken to put on our CVs? [...] Are they going to judge us based on our looks? Maybe I think it is just mainly for large companies – ‘it has always been like this, so we are going to keep this application processes’. They are the ones in power and even though I can’t change anything, so I have to sort of go with it. I think we experience different[ly] [men and women], it has to be different. In terms of how you present yourself, I guess? I look at job hunting books and there are always pages that explain how you should wear depending on the company.”

(Respondent 1)

This internal conflict reflects how in the Japanese society, women are often based on their *'female attributes'* or emphasised femininity. Current literature shows that there are distinct sets of expectations towards men and women in Japan which determines a different set of desirable personality traits. In Japan, men are often characterised as being aggressive, independent, dominant, confident etc. while women are characterised as being tactful, gentle, quiet and sensitive to others' feelings. This is very much rooted to the established beliefs of gendered division of labour in the society. The Japanese society have a different set of expectations and social practices toward the sexes (Sugihara and Katsurada 2000, pp. 310-311). However, this thesis study's participants are not passive receivers of knowledge. They express the opinion and feeling of the system being gender discriminatory, and that they believe in their skills and intelligence to be assessed fairly – a *'gender equality'* interpretative repertoire is thus identified and was deployed. Although there is a discursive tension between the *'female attributes'* and the *'gender equality'* interpretative repertoires, some of the young women have in the end come to accept that the interpretative repertoire of *'female attributes'* is more culturally dominant than the *'gender equality'* interpretative repertoire and has become understood as 'common sense' in the society. They themselves believe that they are in too much of a disadvantaged position to challenge the system. The cost to object is greater than acceptance, since the desire of being hired and finding employment is higher.

### 5.2.3 *'Gendered precarious future'*

One dominant and common theme in the accounts deals with insecurity of the future and the anxiety over the possibility of obtaining one's ideal life. The narrative deals with the uncertainty of easily achieving their ideal life due to them being women. I have decided to name this interpretative repertoire '*gendered precarious future*'. This interpretative repertoire presents the issue of unequal division of labour. The recognisable routine of arguments are feelings of anxiety of not having equal opportunities to a career, professional advancement or receiving double burden of unequal household responsibilities. Most of the interviewees wish to have a good work-life balance as their ideal future life. They all also wish to combine their career and family life. However, one discourse in the Japanese society which is very dominant and prevalent portrays expectations of women to end their career ambition in order to take on household responsibilities when creating a family in the future – a male breadwinner model. Although this traditional model has recently begun to fall out of favour, the idea of the breadwinner model still has relatively high support in Japanese society (Honjo 2020, pp. 41-42). The emergence of the '*gendered precarious future*' interpretative repertoire is how the interviewees are evaluating their future prospects and trying to make sense of their situation based on the current socio-cultural context in Japan.

The current discursive climate of gender norms regarding family and household creates the feeling of anxiety over the interviewees' future prospects. Young women are expected to take on numerous roles which are gendered, thereby receiving a triple burden of the unequal household responsibilities and the expectation of being in the labour market (see Standing 2014; Honjo 2020; Chanlett-Avery and Nelson 2014; Emmott 2020). At the moment, according to the interviewees, the Japanese society has not yet reached the level to give the possibility for both parents to work and raise their kids at the same time efficiently. The interviewees are forced into a difficult position between two dominant discourses; the expectation of being a good working woman but at the same time to have a family and be a good mother and wife. One interviewee explains:

“I think they [Japanese women] are such hard working women, because in the society or like from the system they are required to get out of the house and go work, and that is the trend in Japan for a few decades. On the other hand, in the house or in the domestic house, they are expected to do housework and expected to look out for the children mostly and mainly. They are expected two roles, from outside the house and inside of the house.”

(Respondent 5)

To continue, most of the young women interviewed express liberal feminist values of wanting to break away from traditional gender structures and to become more independent and empowered by pursuing a career and gain economic freedom. However, one interviewee describes how men generally have more monetary means and access than women, and if women take maternity leave, it will be difficult for women to earn money in the future. In this sense, women have to rely on their husbands which creates a loss of economic independence. The ‘*gendered precarious future*’ interpretative repertoire relatedly follows the description and evaluation of how these young women believe there is a difference between men and women in achieving their ideal life. Quotations from the interviewees emphasise this perception:

“Yes, I have [anxiety over the future]. About my career I have, because if I want to have a kid, I have some physical time limits, but I don’t want to quit my job. I consulted my friends in Japan about my career and having babies, and they all said that I have to stop working when I have a baby. I don’t want to, and that’s kind of like a dilemma for me. And then they told me that if the company provides you maternity leave, even if you use that, you get laid behind the job. [...] after maternity leave, you can’t really perform compared to other people, especially compared to other men, because you leave work for 2-3 years and you can’t really immediate [ly] produce some good works. [...] Even if the companies promote maternity leave, there is a lot of women who experience [this] disability because they have their maternity leaves, so there’s a gap between reality and what companies think.”

(Respondent 3)

“[As] I said, I want to go abroad, but like in Japan it’s normal for men to have a job abroad and then the wife goes with him. But I never heard of like a female that got a job abroad and then the husband goes with her. So, it is really male dominated country. [...] we haven’t been able to like break that tradition.”

(Respondent 8)

These accounts tell us how women’s careers tend to be interrupted. Current research describes how for those who prioritises family over work, the common options available later in the labour market are part-time contracts, where the tax system encourages women to limit their working hours for the benefit of the household. Cultural expectations on gender roles make the Japanese women’s workforce less valued compared to men (Kitada and Harada 2019, p. 2). Because of this dominant discourse, the ‘*gendered precarious future*’ interpretative repertoire was deployed based on the interviewees’ evaluations and how they are trying to make sense of their future prospects.

#### 5.2.4 ‘*Gendered taboo*’

Based on existing literature of life situations for many women in Japan today, the topic of gender equality and gender discrimination was important to ask the interviewees. Asking questions related to gender equality and gender discrimination helps to create a deeper

understanding of the interviewees' circumstances of life and challenges. Several interviewees connect gender discrimination, gender inequality and gender stereotypes in Japan to a culture of taboo. One commonplace pattern of accounts which emerged in the discussion of gender-related topics was the descriptions of societal pressure to silence discussion of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. Therefore, I have identified this repertoire as '*gendered taboo*'. The identified common theme deals with how the young women feel unheard and hopeless, and the problem of normalisation of gender harassment. As two interviewees proclaim:

"I hear stories of my sister's friends who are working. They would file complaints of sexual harassment, but they would not even get accepted. I have heard stories like that a lot."

(Respondent 1)

"Sexually harassed in the train is very common, but even if you speak out of it, people will be like 'I had that, that's normal, I don't think that it's your "special thing"'. I think that atmosphere is crazy, a little bit scary for me I would say. [...] also coming out that you have [a] traumatic sexual harassment experience is also something that you should be feeling ashamed of."

(Respondent 5)

A discursive tension can be detected. Many of these young women do have a more progressive, liberal feminist opinion when it comes to gender roles and stereotypes in society. Gender equality is often argued for in the interviews, but due to the norms of taboo being so culturally dominant it becomes difficult for the interviewees to voice out or act upon the problem. This has according to some created a state of obliviousness and ignorance among Japanese people, even among women. The quotations below reflect on how topics of gender issues are often shrouded.

"To be honest, I don't feel like there is a huge disparity. But recently, [the scandal of the Olympics committee Mori-san], I saw some news that there is a huge gender gap in Japan. Like, Japan is placed 121 out of 150 countries, I thought it was very low and I thought that Japan must have a huge gender gap, and I felt like the issue is that I didn't realise the gender gap, the people doesn't realise that there is a gender gap, I think that is the biggest issue."

(Respondent 10)

"[...] I can't talk about this topic [gender equality] much, because again, I feel like people would judge me. I often talk about this topic with my sister but not with people around me in general. [...] there is like a really traditional mindset [...], there's a lot of people who has this very traditional mindset, so whenever you say something sort of new to them, they might judge you about that. And a lot of girls as well they don't really understand this topic [gender equality] still."

(Respondent 8)

Present literature express how the Japanese government has made an effort in promoting women's greater inclusion in the labour market, but Japan has still not done enough to address its responsibilities in protecting women from rape or harassment. Many women experience sexual harassment at their workplace. However, few women take action and report their experiences. This is due to sexual harassment not being considered a crime in Japan and remains a private matter. Because of this, women feel the obligation to endure the harassment in order to keep their jobs. The culture of silence is thus very entrenched (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, pp. 103-104). The narrative from the interviewees shows the struggles young women in Japan have to face. The frustration of not having equal working conditions or equal opportunity in life, whether in education, career and family, as well as the vulnerability and exposure to sexual harassments and gender discrimination, shows what the situation is like for many of the interviewees today. It appears that the culture of taboo has become so dominant and entrenched in the Japanese society due to the fact that women perceive the risk of shaming, alienation, or termination to be greater.

### 5.3 Precarious repertoires

The following section of the analysis deals with interpretative repertoires of precariousness, not necessarily gendered ones. Here are the accounts of heightening precarious situations faced by the interviewees.

#### 5.3.1 'Culture of silence'

In relation to the previously discussed interpretative repertoire of '*gendered taboo*', I will name this interpretative repertoire '*culture of silence*'. The interviewees give the account of a culture of constraint and silence of expressing opinions and thoughts by referencing the negative perception of doing something 'outside the normal'. If the interviewees have anxiety or insecurity about their future or regarding their situations or if they express the desire to pursue something different (outside the norm), they are pressured by societal norms to not discuss it. Below are two quotes which emphasis this feeling:

"I think like especially I live in Japan, there is a peer pressure in Japan. You have to be the same as people around you, having the same opinion. So sometimes, I feel like anxious whether I have the same opinion as my friend. [...] We have this saying of read the air, it is like really generalised in Japan. You sort of like look at the community and look at the people around you and see if you are not standing out and say the same opinion and stuff like that. [...] Japanese people are not good at speaking up, because you have to have the same opinion as the people around you and be 'normal'. I think that we have to change our mindset in order to change the situation [gender inequality]."

(Respondent 8)

“Sometimes I feel like I am looked down upon. I feel uncomfortable talking about this [problems, gender equality, anxiety to my Japanese friends] because they would not understand me, understand the system, why this could be a problem. They do not get that.”

(Respondent 0)

Many interviewees describe the reluctance of sharing their experiences due to fear of being shamed or embarrassed. This also points to the discovery of how few safety-nets these young women can rely on. Most of them only have few friends or family to talk to regarding their struggles or anxieties. Previous research (Ito et al. 2015) has indicated how East Asian immigrants in North America hesitate to seek help from close friends or family members. They were highly concerned about embarrassment, the risk of harming a relationship, the negative evaluations of others and one’s obligation to be a mature group member who lives up to group standards. Simply put, people often tend to seek help when they expect that the members of their cultural group approve of the act of seeking help and that it is perceived as a common practice (p. 530). The article of Ito et al. (2015) demonstrates how cultural norms are an important underlying factor for help-seeking behaviours. If help-seeking behaviours were perceived to be less common, they become more costly (pp. 543, 545). The cultural norms and expectations of not seeking help creates the culture of silence and practice of taboo of talking about for example gender discrimination or even speaking up about challenges in life. This in turn creates more anxiety or precariousness for many of the young interviewees as some of them do not have many channels to receive support or help from.

### 5.3.2 ‘System of precariousness’

Another interesting interpretative repertoire detected is what I call ‘system of precariousness’. Accounts of challenges of the job-hunting system has been discussed previously, but this interpretative repertoire diversifies this narrative faced by some interviewees even further. To the question concerning if the interviewees believed that the current job market in Japan is fair, few believed it is fair, while most believe otherwise. One heightening sense of precariousness among some interviewees deals with the structural unfairness in employment selection. Some of the young women are anxious over their future and career prospects due to the unfair system of companies often preferring recruiting students from specific universities. As one student accounts:

“[I think it is] unfair because it is likely that companies only see students’ educational background and [I] sometimes felt the interviews and the documents don’t really matter. Companies would look only for students from specific universities.”

(Respondent 13)

This system creates enhanced stress and a sense of precariousness for some of the young interviewees who will soon graduate. This has in turn created a narrative of wanting to “obtain a stable and safe life”. Combined with a labour market that is fiercely competitive and with the impact of Covid-19, an increased sense of precariousness is detectable amongst the interviewees. In addition, in line with current literature, due to educational attainment for women having been seen as less important than for men, and how although more Japanese women are pursuing a degree in higher education, highly educated women are still in relatively ‘low-status’ jobs (Honjo 2020, pp. 42, 45). Therefore, some of the interviewees express the desire for a ‘stable’ employment or wish for a good job at a company. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that many of the interviewees do believe it is easy to get a job but perceive the labour market in Japan to not be fair. Others believe it is neither easy nor fair, depending on what background one has.

#### 5.4 ‘Troubled’ subject positions

This part of the analysis will investigate how the interviewees engage with the earlier identified dominant interpretative repertoires, how they resort to or resist these in different contexts or choose to take up subject positions that in broader social terms are considered as ‘troubled’ subject positions.

##### 5.4.1 *Subject positions*

As illustrated previously, although the interviewees resorted to gendered interpretative repertoires for their sense making and subject positioning, in the interview context at least, this most often was a critical engagement that reflected their individual internal struggle and desire for a range of alternative positionings that would be considered ‘troubled’ from the perspective of the broader society. As earlier discussed, gender roles and gender expectations in society (e.g., ‘*gendered expectations*’ interpretative repertoire) encourages the interviewees to adopt a gendered subjectivity, but the interviewees show their reluctance and desire to explore other alternative forms of subjectivity. Most of the interviewees have reluctantly come to accept positioning themselves in terms of the discourse on gender that is dominant in the broader society – e.g., that women are not expected to aim for higher education or STEM related fields



– but at the same time, on the individual level the interviewees perceive themselves of not being ‘in sync’ with the dominant societal discursive category. Some even express the desire to apply for graduate school after a few years in employment, and express critical arguments to social norms in place towards women.

Another similar example is how dominant gender roles in Japanese society expects women to behave in a certain way and have specific attributes, and their skills are judged based on their gender (i.e., ‘*female attributes*’ interpretative repertoire), but the interviewees have come to position themselves at least in the intimate contexts of women’s friendship relations, critically to the identified gendered interpretative repertoire and gender norms in society. However, the ‘*female attributes*’ interpretative repertoire is perceived by the interviewees as being culturally dominant as ‘common sense’ in the society, which places the interviewees in a disadvantaged position in many situations (e.g., within the job-hunting system), and they thus adhere to the gender norms in the society and act accordingly in public. For most young women in the study, the social identities or gendered subjectivities often encouraged by for example ‘*gendered expectations*’ and ‘*female attributes*’ interpretative repertoires or discourses related to that, are mostly disaffirmed at least when being in certain intimate contexts such as women’s friendships and the interview situation. Given different context, some subject positioning might seem more resistant and ‘troubled’. Everyone adopts different social identities depending on the social context and with different people (see Phoenix et al. 2003).

#### 5.4.2 ‘*Troubled*’ subject positions – ‘*culture of silence*’

Subject positioning is very contextual and depending on the context people variably accept or dispute the same subject positions. ‘*Troubled*’ subject positions are positions which challenge the normativity in certain everyday contexts, and is constructed as ‘inappropriate, destabilised, difficult’ and ‘not in sync’ in relation to what is considered as normal or preferred (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 157). ‘*Gendered taboo*’ interpretative repertoire and the discourse surrounding the culture of silence in Japan, encourages individuals to adopt a specific social identity/subject position. Due to the culture of taboo of gender harassment, gender discrimination and gender inequality not being openly and actively discussed in the society, a situation has been created where women in Japan feel more or less compelled to avoid voicing their thoughts and experiences. Many of the interviewees are struggling to comply with this social norm. On an individual level, they do not accept this subject positioning and are critical to the existing cultural expectation. Therefore, their subject positioning in relation to the societal

norms can be seen as resistant or ‘troubled’. However, some social contexts are forcing the interviewees to subject position themselves in line with the social expectations. The interviewees are critical to the existing discourse, however, they feel compelled to adapt depending on the situation, as presenting an attitude of resistance or criticism can bring more challenges and precarious situations for them. One interviewee describes:

“I think it depends on the environment, in my university there are people who [has] liberal thinking [and] I feel like they always try to accept others, so I can easily talk or express my feelings. But when I [am] out of university, I hesitate. I always try to see other [expressions] and try to fix my opinion. I think there is a lot of stereotype and I feel fear of being hated by others, disliked by others. [...] so, if they have this stereotype and I say my opinion, and if they think that my idea is not generally accepted, I fear like they are not accepting me.”

(Respondent 10)

As mentioned, the interviewees show awareness that being critical and showing resistance to dominant norms and interpretative repertoires were associated with social costs and the risk of ending up in precarious situations. In order to protect themselves, the young women resorted to the interpretative repertoire of ‘*culture of silence*’ in order to legitimise that they restricted their articulation of criticism and resistance to the intimate sphere of female friends only. Therefore, depending on the context, the interviewees do not actively try to discuss with other people or voice out their personal difficulties of the fear of being judged or alienated. This highlights how dominant the discourse is, and constrains what can be thought, said and acted upon.

#### 5.4.3 ‘*Troubled*’ subject position – ‘*gendered expectations*’

Two interviewees had chosen to take up the to some degree ‘troubled’ subject position of pursuing a higher degree and profession within STEM related fields. Another example is an interviewee who was willing to consider taking up a ‘troubled’ subject position if she was to be confronted with what for her would be an impossible life choice. She said that if she does not find an employment or partner who will give her the freedom to both balance her career and family life, she would then be single for the rest of her life, i.e.:

“I just want to earn money so I can take care of myself, I would definitely work. If I have to quit work when I marry, I won’t marry. Because I want to be a teacher and a researcher. I won’t give up my dreams for marriage.”

(Respondent 9)

Remaining single can be seen as ‘troubled’ subject position and resistant to the preferred traditional social norm and expectations of women being encouraged to focus on the family and have a supplemental role in the family income (see Honjo 2020). These are two examples of

how some young women are willing to act on their defiance to the dominant gender and cultural norms by embracing ‘troubled’ subject positions, not only as individuals in the intimate setting of friends, but also in broader social contexts.

#### 5.4.4 ‘Troubled’ subject positions – ‘gender equality’

As earlier mentioned, the young women find certain subject positions especially difficult to accept and align with their intimate sense of self and self-representation. An example is the subject positions associated with the interpretative repertoires of ‘*female attributes*’, all interviewees are highly critical towards these interpretative repertoires. However, and in spite of showing more affinity towards the ‘*gender equality*’ interpretative repertoires, they have reservations about adopting liberal feminist subject positions other than in contexts of close female friends. Again, they resorted to the ‘*culture of silence*’ interpretative repertoire to justify why they avoided taking up gender equality positions in broader social contexts, where these would be perceived as ‘troubled’ subject positions, and therefore would be associated with the risk of marginalisation and precariousness. By adopting and deploying a more ‘*gender equality*’ interpretative repertoire and subject positioning in, for example the job-hunting process, they consider that they would be taking up a ‘troubled’ subject position within the job-hunting system, which would be to their disadvantage.

Additionally, reflections on ‘troubled’ subject positions appear in the interviewees’ discussion of the perception of what is a ‘Japanese woman’. Several of the interviewees who identified themselves of having ‘liberal feminist’ values – a more ‘*gender equality*’ interpretative repertoire – are concerned with what can be seen as a ‘troubled’ subject position for an individual in their individual terms. At times this is considered not being ‘in sync’ with the dominant discourse in the society and certain socio-cultural contexts. Many describe the societal perception of a ‘Japanese woman’ as cast in traditional gender stereotypes. However, the interviewees are critical to the current social gender norms and try to distance themselves from adopting such social identities. Therefore, on an individual level, and in intimate friendship settings some interviewees are taking on a ‘troubled’ subject positioning in relation to the dominant gender stereotypes of how women should behave, look and act in Japan. However, the interviewees do agree that adopting this ‘troubled’ subject position is not always desirable in every situation and context, especially in a bigger group or societal level, as it is associated with social costs:

“Women internalise what the men expect us to do. They like to be meek, to be protected like a flower. Fragile, feminine and shy. Women internalise the traits to what men like. They need to be more feminine and slim, have good communication [skills] and good at make other people feel good. Society still asks for these characteristics. Society works in this way, and women live what they are expected in the society. Society is based on ignorance. As a result, they are ignoring it [ignoring that there are gender structures], it is so normal for them. It is kind of air, always around you so you don’t notice.”

(Respondent 0)

“[...] I think that Japanese women themselves reproduce definition of Japanese woman. [...] society is getting changed, but like women themselves just sometimes think that ‘we have to be behind men and take care of the family as a housewife’. That is how [it is] reproduced and the subject of that reproduction is about women.”

(Respondent 3)

The above quotations exemplify how the interviewees consider many women in Japan to internalise and reinforce gender stereotypes and subject position themselves in line with traditional gender norms and discourse. This is because being resistant could put women in a more precarious situation, e.g., their social status or environmental conditions will be affected.

Respondent 6 is a very outspoken feminist which often, according to herself, puts her in a ‘troubled’ subject position in relation to the dominant gendered discourse and norms in the society. Much of her arguments and narratives deployed in the interview can be identified as a ‘*gender equality*’ interpretative repertoire. She expresses a displeasure with the culture and expectation of what she calls ‘men dominance over women’ and how women are ‘happy’ in that kind of life and culture. She often positions herself critically towards the dominant gender discourses and norms both in intimate and social settings. However, when she is amongst her circle of feminist friends, she deploys more a ‘*gender equality*’ interpretative repertoires. However, what is interesting to note here is that when she is with her boyfriend, she avoids taking up a ‘troubled’ subject position, i.e., what can be seen as troubled in social terms:

“[...] I was trying to escape from that world, because I hate that culture. [...] [My boyfriend] has similar mind of men dominance over women, it is interesting that I feel a bit comfortable with him. Maybe it is because I was raised in that kind of or similar culture in Japan. I am [a] feminist and I was keen to get out from that world but still I feel happy. [...] Equality is really important, but for me probably I don’t want to support men dominance culture, but I would rather be comfortable in that culture. It is a paradox. Maybe I felt happy because I am supporting men who I love.”

(Respondent 6)

To fully and wholeheartedly adopt a ‘*gender equality*’ subject position when she is with her boyfriend is according to her difficult to embrace. Her account illustrates how individuals adopt

different subject positions and social identities in different intimate and social settings or contexts.

Taken together, the findings in this chapter have demonstrated that the young women in this study do feel and experience precariousness in different aspects of their lives, as well as the feeling of uncertainty for their future. Different subject positions and social identities are adopted depending on the social settings and contexts. Sometimes, the young women are compelled to align themselves to the encouraged gendered subjectivity by the dominant norms and discourses in society in order to reconcile to their circumstances. The interviewees also show confidence in their own capacity to manage their lives and they are motivated to try to secure a future they desire.

## 6. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of current literature and research on women's situations and seemingly heightening precariousness in Japan today, the goal of the thesis was to attempt to shed light on how a group of privileged young educated Japanese women experience their life situations and perceive their future prospects. As the academic literature and the findings of this study portray, these young women feel and perceive some aspects of their life situations and future as precarious – the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. Based on the identified interpretative repertoires, some have an increased sense of precariousness due to Covid-19 and certain (gendered) societal structures (e.g., within the job-hunting system). Others experience an amplified feeling of precariousness depending on the social context and what subject position (social identities) they deploy. That being said, the young women do show a certain amount of confidence about their own capacity to manage their lives. Life according to them also consists of compromises and sacrifices. They do to an extent try to live their lives according to their wishes and on their own terms, but they also sometimes resort to the dominant gendered interpretative repertoires to reconcile themselves with their circumstances. Still, they are feeling insecure about their future. They very much understand their sense of precariousness in inter-relational terms, and as a matter of trying to avoid taking up 'troubled' subject positioning in contexts of social significance.

Most interpretative repertoires identified from the interviewees' accounts when they are trying to make sense, discuss or evaluate different topics, events and questions surrounding their circumstances of life, are gendered. The recognised gendered interpretative repertoires reflect feelings of precariousness on different aspects of life amongst the interviewees. For some, the struggle of pursuing something outside of the societal norms, e.g., a professional career within STEM or going for graduate school, contributed to a heightening feeling of displacement and difficulty. Others express a feeling of precariousness in relation to their perception of the future. Due to gender structures, norms and expectations on women when it comes to behaviour, safety, career, professional advancement and family-building, many of the young women feel insecure of obtaining their ideal life and future. All of the interviewees are career driven and strive for economic independence, good work-life balance and family building. However, due to the dominant culture of gender roles and expectations in Japan today, even privileged groups like these highly educated young women have the feeling of anxiety of receiving a life with multiple gendered burdens and therefore they feel uncertain of their future. However, some of the young

women do show confidence and determination in trying to secure their lives and future according to their own wishes.

The participants in this study frequently have to navigate themselves in different socio-cultural contexts. Depending on the social contexts, they have to take on different subject positions and social identities. The second question asked in this thesis is how the young women subject position themselves in relation to the dominant gendered interpretative repertoires. Especially in certain intimate contexts and in the interview settings, they position themselves critically, resistant and 'troubled'. However, it is important to distinguish between individual, group and societal level. Although on an individual level and in close-knit settings, these young women often position themselves resistant to the culturally dominant gender norms and gendered discourses in the broader society, as adopting a 'troubled' subject position in bigger social contexts can contribute to an increased precariousness for them. Due to some interpretative repertoires and norms in society being more culturally dominant and viewed as 'common sense', they are compelled to align and compromise to the social identities within the gendered interpretative repertoires and gender roles (e.g., during the job-hunting process). Therefore, in some broader societal and group contexts, they are compelled to align themselves to the encouraged gendered subjectivity by the dominant norms and discourses in society in order to reconcile to their circumstances. Simply put, to adopt a resistant subject position in these socio-cultural contexts is perceived to bring more societal costs for the interviewees.

I am aware that the degree of feeling and experiencing precariousness drastically varies between societal groups. However, we shall not undermine the importance of trying to understand the vulnerability of a group of people who might not usually and traditionally be seen as the most marginalised people in society. These young women who participated in the study are the future generation of Japan, and the fact that many diverse aspects of their circumstances of life and future are perceived as precarious, points out the need to increase the exposure of women's many aspects and dimensions of vulnerability and the need to improve it. As Judith Butler argues, people are interdependent on each other, and our dependency makes us more vulnerable and precarious. Individuals are always seeking recognition from others, and those who fail to conform to social norms are even more precarious (Butler 2012; Butler 2004). In this sense, everyone is dependent on each other, and young women in Japan are very much so. The interviewees are in the critical point in their lives where they need to be recognised by different

groups of people and by the society as a whole – in order to graduate, for their future career, future family building, safety etc.

Within the current broader literature on gender studies in Japan, there are not much written on young women's subjective feelings and experiences of precariousness. Although there has been attempts and progress made for women's empowerment and emancipation (e.g., 'Womonomics'), Japanese women's life situation and gender equality has not yet progressed to a desirable level. Some aspects of the interviewees' life are precarious, and they have a precarious perception of their future. Studying precariousness should not only be studied within the field of neoliberal capitalism or with focus on one specific group, i.e., working women and their employment conditions. This thesis has thus attempted to prove the relevance to the research field inherent in studying this particular focus group.

This thesis has given attention to young women's vulnerability and precariousness in Japan. Everyone has a degree of precariousness, however, what seems to appear is that precarious circumstances of life are disproportionately affecting women. Therefore, the call for better gender policies and the effort for the betterment of women in Japan remains a crucial issue. As Kano (2015) describes, what is often missing and not often critically discussed is how the promotion of gender equality and gender policies in Japan should be motivated not because it has potential to tackle the demographic condition and the economic stagnation in the country (i.e., 'Womonomics') but because it is actually the right thing to do (pp. 92-93).

This thesis study does not aim to generalise the findings to all young women in Japan. As Charlebois (2014) notes, the conclusions may be conditional, applicable to only a particular group of participants. However, the interviewees are drawing from socio-cultural contexts and discourses that circulate and are available to members of Japanese society at large. This may have implications that extend beyond these participants (p. 28). Therefore, it could be of interest to include more participants for further research to contribute to a more comprehensive examination of young women's precarious life situations and perception of the future in Japan.



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## Appendices

Appendix I – Table 1. Interview respondents and sample

Respondents	Year in University - Undergraduates	University	Language used in the interview	Interview length	Date of the interview
Respondent 0 “Pilot interview”	Graduate student	Former Keio University	English	1h 30min	10.02.2021
Respondent 1 “Pilot interview”	Third year	Waseda University	English	58min	11.02.2021
Respondent 2	Fourth year	Tokyo University	English	1h 19min	16.02.2021
Respondent 3	Fourth year	Hosei University	English	1h 08min	17.02.2021
Respondent 4	Third year	Kinjo Gakuin University	English	56min	18.02-2021
Respondent 5	Third year	Keio University	English	1h 05min	19.02.2021
Respondent 6	Fourth year	Keio University	English	1h 37min	21.02.2021
Respondent 7	Fourth year	Keio University	English	1h 37min	21.02.2021
Respondent 8	Fourth year	Keio University	English	51min	22.02.2021
Respondent 9	Third year	Waseda University	English	1h 37min	23.02.2021
Respondent 10	Third year	International Christian University	English	1h 14min	28.02.2021
Respondent 11	Fourth year	Tsuda University	English	1h 32min	03.03.2021
Respondent 12	Second year	Kwansei Gakuin University	English	1h 01min	04.03.2021
Respondent 13	Fourth year	Takasaki Keizai University	Japanese with English translation	1h 37min	07.03.2021

## Appendix II – Interview Guide

### Themes:

- a. Education experiences
- b. Career
- c. Perception of the future
- d. Expectations – gender roles
- e. General experiences of precariousness
- f. Safety net and network/community
- g. Gender discrimination – gender equality

### Interview questions:

#### Education experiences

1. Can you please tell me about yourself and your education background?
2. How come you applied to study at university?
3. Was it easy or difficult for you, as a young woman, to get accepted to university?
4. Do you feel that you get opportunity and space to express your opinions and thoughts in the classroom, seminars, discussion groups settings etc.?
5. (Tokyo Medical School scandal) – Prestigious universities in Japan (Tokyo, Keio, Waseda etc.) – only 1/3 of student population are female. What are your thoughts on this? Why do you think this is the case?

#### Career

1. Can you please describe your plans after university graduation?
2. Have you experienced job hunting in Japan? If yes, can you describe your experiences?
3. Do you think men and women experience differently in regard to job hunting in Japan?
4. Do you feel/think that the job market right now is fair in Japan, and is it easy to get a job? (Womenomics and Covid-19).

#### Future perception

1. What is your ideal life – what do you wish for in your life?
2. Do you feel that your ideal life is easily obtainable/achievable?
3. Do you think that there is any difference/significance being a man or a woman in achieving your ideal life?

4. Do you feel any anxiety (fuan) over the future?
5. Do you feel you can live your life the way you want to?
6. Has COVID-19 made any impact on your experiences and perception on your goals?

#### Expectations – gender roles

1. What do you think the expectations are on you (in general, regarding your life, your role and your future etc.) from the society, your family, and people close to you?
2. Do you think the expectations are reasonable?
3. What is a “Japanese woman” according to you?
4. What is your view on love, family and partnership? (Work-life balance)

#### General experiences of precariousness

1. Can you describe any general experiences and/or feeling of hardship/anxieties (fuan, fuantei) you think is affecting you in your daily life?
2. Do you feel that you can easily talk and discuss about your difficulties and/or feelings of anxiety (fuan) in general in Japan?

#### Safety net

1. Do you have a network of people/community who you can talk to about your anxieties (fuan, fuantei) and struggles and get support from?
2. If yes, do they have similar experiences as you?
3. What other kind of support or safety net can you rely on? Family, friends, university, support groups etc.?

#### Gender discrimination – gender equality

1. Do you have knowledge about the #metoo/#wetoo movement in Japan?
2. What are your thoughts on the movement and why do you think it gained momentum in Japan?
3. Do you think something has changed/improved?
4. Do you know or have experienced any gender discrimination?
5. How do you perceive gender equality in Japan today?