



Mediated Realities: A Digital Discourse Analysis of Japanese Single Mothers on Contrasting YouTube Channels

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Abstract. Single motherhood in Japan exists within a social context that continues to privilege the heteronormative family and the ideology of *ryōsai kenbō* (“good wife, wise mother”). As a result, single mothers are often positioned as socially marginal and morally ambiguous figures, a perception that is frequently reproduced through media representations. While previous studies have examined portrayals of single motherhood in print media, cinema, and television, limited attention has been given to how single motherhood is mediated and negotiated within participatory digital platforms such as YouTube. This study aims to analyze the digital discourse construction of Japanese single mothers on two contrasting YouTube channels: *Being a Single Mother in Japan (Asian Boss)* and *What’s It Like to Become a Single Mother in Japan? (Japan Documented)*. The analysis employs Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model of discourse analysis—encompassing language use, social cognition, and social context—combined with the Japanese motherhood ideology of *ryōsai kenbō*. The novelty of this study lies in its methodological approach, using digital discourse analysis to examine mediated realities of single motherhood on YouTube. Substantively, the study offers new insights into how contrasting digital platforms construct divergent maternal subjectivities within the same cultural context. The findings reveal that although both videos portray single mothers as resilient and capable, they construct different representations of motherhood. Ayano’s narrative emphasizes emotional struggle, sacrifice, and moral endurance aligned with traditional maternal ideals, whereas Kimiko’s narrative foregrounds reflexivity, autonomy, and a partial negotiation of conventional gender norms.

Keywords: Digital Discourse Analysis; Mediated Realities; Japanese Single Mothers; Youtube; *Ryōsai Kenbō*

1 Introduction

Single mothers are among the most marginalized social groups. According to [1], a single mother is defined as a woman who is divorced, widowed, or has never been married and has at least one child under the age of 18. In the Japanese context, [1] note that the number of single mothers has been steadily increasing, yet they remain among

the most economically vulnerable populations. They experience high rates of poverty, receive limited income support from the government, and often lack adequate child allowances. This condition is reflected in data from the 2022 National Survey on Living Standards, as cited by [2] which highlights the persistent economic hardship faced by single-mother households in Japan.

[2] reports that the average household income for families with children is USD 52.3 (7,850,000 yen). In contrast, the average income of single-mother households amounts to only 47% of that figure—approximately USD 24.9 (3,730,000 yen). Divorced and unmarried single mothers are required to work to sustain their families; however, only 48.2% can obtain full-time employment, while 36% are engaged in non-regular or part-time work.

According to [2], single mothers in Japan remain highly vulnerable to social stigma. Japanese society continues to uphold the ideal of the modern traditional family, consisting of a father as the breadwinner, a mother as the homemaker, and two children. Single mothers who live independently without a partner are often perceived as individuals who have “betrayed” the ideal family structure and are therefore considered “shameful.” Divorce is similarly regarded as undesirable and as a disruption to the moral foundation of the modern family. Consequently, single mothers are frequently labeled as “unacceptable” and “selfish.” Furthermore, certain conservative groups hold prejudiced views toward government assistance programs for single mothers, expressing concern that such support might increase divorce rates by making single motherhood appear more viable or socially acceptable.

[3] notes that although divorce rates in Japan continue to rise, not all women are willing to identify themselves as single mothers. This reluctance stems from the perception that raising a child alone constitutes a heavy social burden within Japanese society. Kunihiya Koyama, director of the non-profit organization Little Ones, which supports single-mother families through an online platform called Kokomina providing essential information for single mothers, argues that Japanese media have portrayed single mothers in a problematic manner. According to Koyama, the media often depict Japanese mothers as objects of pity, reinforcing the image of single-mother families as weak and perpetually dependent on external assistance. However, as Koyama emphasizes, there is also a dimension of resilience and perseverance among single mothers that deserves recognition and visibility [3]. In other words, the media play a crucial role in constructing the image of single mothers in Japan—either by reinforcing existing stigmas or by challenging them through alternative representations.

Research on the representation of single mothers in the media has been conducted in several countries outside Japan. One such study is by [4] who examined the portrayal of single mothers in Swedish newspapers. Their analysis identified variations in representation across social classes—from working-class and middle-class mothers to single mothers who are public figures or celebrities. On one hand, single mothers are depicted as hardworking and admirable for their persistence and dedication to their children. On the other hand, they are often portrayed as impoverished, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes. The strength of this study lies in its identification of contradictory representations, yet its limitation is its narrow focus on print media [4]. Meanwhile, [5] analyzed the representation of single mothers who conceive through sperm donation.

Their findings reveal that the media often frame such “unconventional” reproductive models in sensational or controversial ways, leading to the stigmatization of single mothers. This study effectively illustrates the relationship between media discourse and the construction of social stigma; however, its scope is con-fined to technologically mediated reproduction [5].

In the context of cinema, [6] compared Japanese and American horror films, revealing how single mothers are portrayed as both “bad mothers” (the monstrous feminine) and “good mothers” aligned with traditional gender norms. The strength of this study lies in its cross-cultural comparison between Japan and the United States; however, its limitation is the narrow focus on the specific genre of horror. Meanwhile, [7] examined Japanese television dramas portraying single mothers as fragile, tragic, and impoverished figures, while simultaneously reproducing traditional motherhood roles. The strength of Mithani’s study lies in its deep engagement with the Japanese cultural context, yet its limitation is its reliance on a single television drama as the object of analysis.

From the studies above, it is evident that research on the representation of single mothers in the media has predominantly focused on print media, news outlets, horror films, and television dramas, with limited attention to digital platforms such as YouTube. The research gap of this study lies in the lack of scholarly inquiry into how single mothers are represented within YouTube videos, which have become one of the most influential and participatory media spaces in Japan today. To address this gap, the present study aims to analyze the representation of Japanese single mothers through two YouTube channels – Asian Boss Channel [8] and Japan Documented Channel [9]. The analysis employs the theoretical framework of *ryōsai kenbō* (the “good wife, wise mother” ideology), the concept of Japanese motherhood as discussed by [12] and [11]’s model of critical discourse analysis to ex-amine how the videos “Being a Single Mother in Japan” and “What’s It Like to Be-come a Single Mother in Japan” construct discourses surrounding single motherhood in Japanese society.

Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its methodological approach, which applies digital discourse analysis to two YouTube videos. Moreover, this research offers a new perspective on the diverse constructions of single motherhood in Japan, as viewed through the distinct narrative frameworks of two different YouTube channels.

2 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using digital discourse analysis. [10] defines digital discourse as far from homogeneous, encompassing a wide range of genres and platforms. In recent years, many scholars of digital discourse have focused on interactional data—whether in one-to-one or one-to-many genres of communication. The current potentials for one-to-many communication in digital spaces are, as [10] notes, unprecedented. The data for this research consist of two YouTube videos: “Being a Single Mother in Japan” (Asian Boss channel [8]) and “What’s It Like to Become a Single Mother in Japan?” (Japan Documented channel [9]), both retrieved from the internet. The videos were selected using the keywords “single mother, Japan” and were chosen

based on the following criteria. First, both channels address the topic of single motherhood, a persistent social issue in contemporary Japan. Second, the two videos share a similar content format in which the host serves as interviewer and the single mother as interviewee. Finally, the videos were produced in different years, allowing for potential variations in the thematic and social framing of single motherhood over time

2.1 Data Collection

Data were collected from two YouTube videos on the channels Asian Boss [8] and Japan Documented [9], focusing on single mothers in Japan (see Figure 1). Relevant comments were also examined to capture audience perspectives, primarily from international viewers. All verbal and auditory content was documented for analysis.

Before analysis, the researcher carefully watched both videos while reviewing the complete and accurate transcripts of the dialogues, which served as the primary textual data. The transcripts were generated by entering the video links into the website downsub.com, after which the Japanese and English subtitles were downloaded in text format. The YouTube videos selected for analysis are listed as follows.

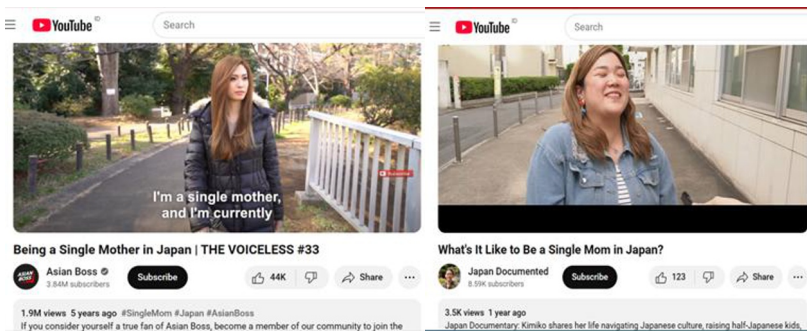


Fig. 1. YouTube videos used as primary data [8,9]

2.2 Data Analysis

This study employs [11]’s discourse analysis framework to examine the representation of Japanese single mothers in digital media, specifically YouTube videos. In *Discourse as Structure and Process*, [11] introduces the concept of discourse as a form of language use—public speech or, more broadly, spoken language and ways of speaking. However, within the context of media and social sciences, such as in the discourse of neoliberalism, the term “discourse” extends beyond linguistic expression. It encompasses the ideas and philosophies associated with the speakers or actors involved.

Discourse analysis, therefore, is not limited to examining language use alone but extends to the broader social and ideological dimensions that shape it. [11] emphasizes that discourse involves its users, considering who speaks, when, how, and why. He refers to this dynamic process as a communicative event, meaning a social situation in which texts or discourses are produced, distributed, and interpreted within specific contexts. People use language to communicate ideas and beliefs in various circumstances—

such as meeting friends, talking on the phone, or writing and reading news articles. In such complex communicative situations, participants are not merely exchanging information; they are also engaging in interaction. This process of exchange and negotiation of meaning is what [11] describes as verbal interaction.

[11] introduces the foundational concept of discourse as comprising three inter-related dimensions: (1) language use, (2) the communication of beliefs (cognition), and (3) interaction in social situations. These dimensions are integrated and mutually constitutive. Language use is not limited to spoken forms but also encompasses written texts such as newspapers, magazines, and books. Furthermore, discourse analysis involves the examination of text, talk, and context as interconnected elements that shape meaning and social interpretation [11]. Discourse analysis in [11]’s framework comprises three dimensions. The first is language use, which focuses on the textual level of analysis—macrostructure, microstructure, and superstructure. In the context of this study, the macrostructure refers to the overarching topics that frame the two YouTube videos; the microstructure involves the examination of vocabulary choices and linguistic expressions used within the videos; and the superstructure concerns the narrative organization and sequencing of events in each video.

The second dimension is cognition, or the social-cognitive dimension, which concerns the knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies underlying the production and interpretation of discourse. [11] emphasizes that cognition should be understood as a social mental dimension that mediates the relationship between discourse (as linguistic practice) and society (as social structure). Thus, discourse cannot be explained solely through linguistic features (textual structure) or social elements (social structure), but through cognition—namely, the system of knowledge, beliefs, values, and ideologies that discourse participants employ in producing and understanding texts. In this study, the cognitive dimension is examined by identifying the mental models of the video creators in constructing representations of single mothers in Japan, as well as the audience’s attitudes and perceptions as reflected in the comments posted on the YouTube videos. These responses reveal how social cognition shapes and reflects the broader cultural construction of single motherhood in Japanese society.

The third dimension is interaction in social situations, or social context, which highlights the social environment in which discourse is produced and received. This dimension examines the relationships among YouTube content creators, audiences, and the broader Japanese society. By analyzing these three dimensions collectively, the study reveals how the representation of single mothers on YouTube not only reflects individual experiences but also articulates the underlying ideologies and social issues attached to the discourse of single motherhood in Japan, as manifested through the perspectives of two different YouTube channels [11]).

3 Results

This section presents the data derived from excerpts of the YouTube videos “Being a Single Mother in Japan” and “What’s It Like to Become a Single Mother in Japan?”.

The data are analyzed using [11]’s discourse analysis framework, which encompasses three dimensions: language use (text analysis), social cognition, and social context.

3.1 First Dimension: Language Use

Table 1. First Dimension: Language Use

Text Analysis	Ayano	Kimiko
Macrostructure	Single mother is framed as hardship, trauma, and emotional survival (domestic violence, mental illness, divorce, suicidal ideation).	Single mother is framed as part of a broader life narrative including culture, cross-cultural marriage, and personal growth.
Microstructure	<p>1. シングルマザーはみんな それは恥だと思われる文化に直面したこととがあります。</p> <p>2. そういう風潮があることで子供たちにとっても私たちシングルマザー自身にとっても気づらい部分があります。</p> <p>Collective expressions (watashitachi shinguru mazā), emotionally loaded terms (haji, kizurai), and explicit resilience (“overcoming difficulties”).</p>	<p>1. I think um it's sometimes tough sometimes I think really protected or supported</p> <p>2. I wasn't good wife I wasn't decent female or maybe something, wrong with me that's how I feel about being single mom</p> <p>3. One thing is right now is really struggling is that child support.</p> <p>Ambivalent expressions (“sometimes tough”), self-blame (“not a good wife”), references to support and child allowance issues.</p>
Superstructure	Coherent, emotionally intense life-story narrative with moral closure centered on motherhood	Loose, conversational structure emphasizing reflection, acceptance, and cultural commentary rather than dramatization

3.2 Second Dimension: Social Cognition

The cognitive dimension highlights the knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies that underlie the construction of discourse. This can be observed in the following excerpts from the data.

Table 2. Second Dimension: Social Cognition

Cognitive Aspect	Ayano	Kimiko
Social Knowledge	Single mothers associated with stigma, poverty, limited welfare, and lack of child support.	Same shared social knowledge of stigma and economic precarity.
Values & Ideology	Strong embodiment of sacrificial motherhood and maternal self-denial.	Negotiation between <i>ryōsai kenbō</i> ideology and independent female identity.

Audience Attitudes	Empathy, admiration, solidarity; viewers praise resilience and maternal devotion.	Admiration for intelligence, independence, English proficiency, and emotional strength.
	<i>One of the viewers comments:</i> <i>@elenavivi2662:She's gorgeous, depression is tough. "Suffocating Mindset", at least she had that figured out. She dealt with emotional, physical and mental abuse. Not living up to parent's expectations. Divorce, a serial cheater. Suicide attempts. Her precious daughter is her reason to keep pushing. "Live your Life as you want!" Good advice. I wish her well.</i>	<i>One of the viewers comments:</i> <i>@Limastudent:Really admire this mother! So sorry for her disappointment with her ex. She is so brave, smart and beautiful. She should get an English speaking job. She is so very impressive. I wish her a happy life, loving herself and children.</i>
Mental Models	Single mother as morally strong, resilient, and self-sacrificing maternal figure.	Single mother as capable, reflective, and hybrid figure negotiating tradition and modernity.
Meaning Frames	Empowered yet emotionally burdened mother overcoming adversity.	Empowered and intellectually autonomous single mother.

3.3 Third Dimension: Social Context

This dimension connects discourse with broader social structures such as ideology, power relations, culture, and policy that underline the construction of meaning. The following section presents the relevant data illustrating these relationships.

Table 3. Third Dimension: Social Context

Social Dimension	Ayano	Kimiko
Media Platform	Asian Boss – global independent media channel.	Japan Documented – small-scale, heritage-oriented channel.
Cultural Context	Challenges heteronormative family model while reinforcing traditional maternal values.	Reinforces <i>ryōsai kenbō</i> and expectations of marital endurance.
Economic & Policy Context	Insufficient welfare, part-time employment, poverty risk.	Similar limitations; child allowances not always accessible.
Dominant Ideology	Heteronormative family ideology questioned through lived practice.	Heteronormativity and good-wife ideology remain influential.
Public Response	Many public comments expressed sympathy and support for Ayano’s struggles; however,	Predominantly empathetic and respectful responses.

	some (mostly male) viewers made derogatory or flirtatious remarks due to the young and attractive appearance of the single mother depicted.	
Social Representation	Strong, caring mother within a non-traditional family.	Intelligent, reflective mother negotiating gender norms.

4 Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that the contrasting YouTube representations of Ayano and Kimiko construct different mediated realities of single motherhood in Japan through the interaction of narrative form, ideological positioning, and broader social structures. At the level of language use (see Table 1), Ayano's video adopts an emotionally driven narrative that foregrounds hardship, trauma, and endurance. Her repeated use of collective expressions such as "we single mothers" and affective terms like *haji* (shame) and *kizurai* (emotional suffocation) positions her as a representative voice of marginalized single mothers in Japan. This discourse simultaneously emphasizes suffering and resilience, reframing stigma as a source of moral strength through narratives of sacrifice and perseverance for her child. In contrast, Kimiko's video employs a more conversational and reflective style. Her discourse is marked by ambivalence—acknowledging both difficulty and support—and by self-reflexive statements that reveal internalized gender norms, particularly feelings of inadequacy as a "good wife." As a result, Kimiko's identity as a single mother is presented as only one aspect of a broader, more complex self-narrative.

As shown in Table 2, at the level of social cognition, both videos challenge the dominant image of single mothers as passive victims by constructing them as capable and resilient actors. However, the underlying ideological orientations differ. Ayano's discourse aligns closely with traditional maternal ideals that emphasize self-sacrifice, devotion, and moral responsibility. Ayano's expressions about her daughter—her determination to become the best mother possible, her willingness to sacrifice herself, and her instinct to protect her child—reflect the embodiment of the idealized maternal figure in Japanese culture [12]. In contrast, Kimiko's video constructs her as an intelligent single mother with a strong personality and proficient English communication skills. Although Kimiko appears confident in expressing herself, she perceives her status as a single mother as a result of her inability to be a "good" and "worthy" wife to her former husband. Her desire to embody the ideals of a good wife and wise mother reflects the enduring influence of the Meiji-era ideology of *ryōsai kenbō*, which continues to shape gender expectations and perceptions of womanhood and motherhood in contemporary Japanese society [13]. Audience comments further reinforce these cognitive frames, largely legitimizing single motherhood and endorsing both women as socially and morally valid mothers.

Within the broader social context (see Table 3), both narratives expose the tension between persistent heteronormative family ideology and the lived realities of single

mothers in Japan. Ayano and Kimiko represent forms of “queer family” that deviate from the two-parent norm yet remain emotionally and socially functional. Despite limited structural support and policy constraints, the predominantly positive audience responses suggest a gradual shift toward more inclusive understandings of family. Together, these mediated discourses position YouTube as a digital public sphere where dominant family ideologies are not only reproduced but also contested and rearticulated.

5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that contrasting YouTube representations of Japanese single mothers construct distinct mediated realities through the interaction of discourse, ideology, and social context. Using [11]’s discourse framework, the analysis shows that narrative strategies at the textual level shape how single motherhood is framed either through emotional endurance and collective suffering, as in Ayano’s case, or through reflexivity and ambivalence, as in Kimiko’s narrative.

At the socio-cognitive level, both representations challenge dominant stereotypes of single mothers as passive or socially deviant by constructing them as resilient and morally responsible actors. However, the ideological orientations underlying these portrayals differ. Ayano’s discourse closely aligns with traditional maternal ideals emphasizing self-sacrifice and devotion, while Kimiko’s discourse reflects a negotiated maternal identity shaped by internalized gender norms and personal autonomy. Audience responses play a crucial role in reinforcing these interpretations by legitimizing single motherhood as a socially acceptable and morally valid family form.

Within the broader social context, this study highlights the persistent tension between heteronormative family ideology and the lived experiences of single mothers in Japan. Although structural constraints and limited policy support remain, the positive reception of both narratives suggests an emerging shift toward more inclusive understandings of family. Overall, this research underscores YouTube’s role as a digital public sphere in which dominant family ideologies are reproduced, contested, and rearticulated, contributing to ongoing transformations in the social meaning of motherhood in contemporary Japan.

6 Research Implications

This study has both theoretical and practical implications for digital media research, gender studies, and critical discourse analysis. Theoretically, the findings reinforce [11]’s perspective that discourse not only represents social reality but also serves as a medium for producing and reproducing ideology. In the context of digital media, this study demonstrates that platforms such as YouTube function as participatory spaces that enable individuals and marginalized groups, such as single mothers, to negotiate their identities and challenge oppressive social structures. Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for policymakers, women’s rights activists, and content creators in

constructing narratives that are more inclusive, empathetic, and gender-equitable in digital spaces.

7 Research Limitation

The main limitation of this study lies in the quantity and type of data analyzed, which consisted of only two videos from the YouTube channels Asian Boss and Japan Documented. Therefore, the findings cannot yet be generalized to the overall representation of single mothers in Japanese digital media. In addition, this study did not conduct an in-depth multimodal analysis of visual, gestural, and auditory elements, which could provide additional layers of meaning to the discourse construction. The analysis also did not directly capture the perspectives of Japanese audiences, as most of the comments examined came from international viewers. This limits the understanding of how Japanese society itself interprets the representation of single mothers in digital spaces.

8 Future Research

The researcher recommends expanding the scope of the study by including more YouTube channels or other social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, in order to examine differences in representation strategies and audience participation. A multimodal discourse analysis approach can be employed to explore the relationship between language, visuals, and emotional expressions in constructing maternal images. In addition, future research can combine digital ethnography methods to gain a broader understanding of social interactions among single mothers, online communities, and cross-cultural audiences. Thus, subsequent studies are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how discourses of motherhood and family are negotiated in the continually evolving global digital era.

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