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Masculinity in Transition: Contrasting the Salaryman Ideal with Irregular Male Identities in Japan

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Abstract:

This thesis explores representations of masculinity in contemporary Japanese media through a comparative analysis of the 2018 film *Shoplifters* (Japan, dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda) and a selection of Kirin canned coffee television advertisements. Drawing from media studies, masculinity studies, and Japanese cultural studies, the research examines how changing labor structures and shifting social norms are reflected in portrayals of men, fatherhood, and work. The analysis is situated within the broader context of Japan's post-bubble economic transformation, which has weakened the once-dominant ideal of the salaryman and contributed to the rise of irregular employment, particularly among younger generations. The study found that the Kirin advertisements reinforce hegemonic masculinity by upholding the image of the committed salaryman, while *Shoplifters* offers an alternative vision of masculinity shaped by care, emotional intimacy, and economic marginalization. Comparing these two media texts reveals tensions between traditional and emerging masculine roles, particularly in relation to caregiving and employment. These findings suggest that while dominant ideals persist, Japanese media also creates space to question and reimagine male identity in response to social change.

A secondary goal of the thesis is to contribute to the growing field of masculinity studies in the Japanese context, particularly by highlighting underexamined representations of non-regular and precarious masculinities. The findings support the value of using media as a lens through which to understand evolving gender roles and demonstrate how cultural texts can reflect and shape national conversations about identity, work, and belonging.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Background	7
2.1	Idea of the Hegemonic Salaryman	7
2.2	Nonregular Employment in Japan	9
3	Defining Masculinity	11
3.1	Masculinity as a Social Construct	11
3.2	Multiple Masculinities	12
3.3	Hegemonic Masculinity	13
3.4	Hegemonic Masculinity as a Framework	14
3.5	Previous Studies	15
4	Methodology	17
4.1	Method	17
4.2	Data	19
4.2.1	Shoplifters	21
4.2.2	Series of Canned Coffee Advertisements from Kirin	23
4.2.3	Kirin Advertisement 1	23
4.2.4	Kirin Advertisement 2	24
4.2.5	Kirin Advertisement 3	24
4.2.6	Kirin Advertisement 4	25
5	Analysis	26
5.1	Shoplifters	26
5.1.1	Irregular Employment Masculinity	26
5.1.2	Challenging the Normative Definitions of Fatherhood and Parenthood	32
5.2	Kirin Advertisements	40
5.2.1	Kirin Advertisement 1	40
5.2.2	Kirin Advertisement 2	43
5.2.3	Kirin Advertisement 3	45
5.2.4	Kirin Advertisement 4	47
6	Discussion	51
6.1	Shoplifters	51

6.2 Kirin Advertisements	52
6.3 Comparison	54
6.3.1 Work and Masculine Identity	54
6.3.2 Family Dynamics	55
6.3.3 Societal Expectations	57
6.4 Conclusions	58
References	59

1 Introduction

Japan's economic and social structures changed significantly after the burst of the asset price bubble in the early 1990s. The collapse ended the period of high growth and lifetime employment that had shaped postwar society. As Brinton (2011) has shown, Japan's labour market shifted toward irregular and insecure jobs, especially for younger generations who entered adulthood during or after this economic downturn. These changes have made it more difficult for men to achieve the kind of stable employment that once defined adult male identity in Japan.

For many decades, the salaryman has stood at the centre of Japanese masculinity. This figure represented stability, dedication to work, and financial support for the family, and masculinity was closely linked to full-time employment and emotional restraint in the service of the company (Allison, 1994). However, as more men have been excluded from regular work or choose not to pursue it, the salaryman ideal no longer reflects the realities of many younger men (Dasgupta, 2013).

This thesis explores how these tensions appear in Japanese media by comparing two contrasting portrayals of masculinity. The first is the marginalized father figure in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Shoplifters* (2018), and the second is the salaryman character featured in Kirin's long-running coffee advertisements. These examples show different ways of responding to changing economic conditions and social expectations. They raise questions about how media reflects and shapes ideals of manhood in contemporary Japan.

While the figure of the salaryman has been widely studied in Japanese sociology and gender studies, there has been comparatively little attention given to how irregular or marginalized masculinities are represented in Japanese media. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on the stability and symbolic power of the corporate male ideal, but less work has examined how men who fall outside this model such as part-time workers, unemployed men, or alternative caregivers navigate their identities. This thesis addresses that gap by analysing media portrayals of both hegemonic and emergent masculinities, using Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity. In doing so, it highlights how cultural representations both reflect and challenge the dominance of the salaryman ideal in a changing economic landscape. Through close analysis of the source material, this thesis shows how media can reinforce old ideals

but also offer space for new forms of masculinity to appear. In doing so, it provides insight into how Japanese society continues to navigate the tension between long-standing gender roles and the new realities facing its younger generations.

The structure of this thesis is organized to build a contextual and analytical foundation before moving into the core analysis and discussion. Section 2 provides essential background by outlining the cultural construction of the hegemonic salaryman figure and defining the concept of irregular employment within the Japanese labour market. Section 3 introduces key theoretical concepts related to masculinity, such as hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities, and positions Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity as the main analytical framework. This section also reviews previous research on Japanese masculinity to situate the study within existing academic discussions. Section 4 outlines the methodology, explaining the use of thematic analysis and describing the selected media texts that serve as data for the thesis. Section 5 presents the analysis, comparing representations of masculinity in Shoplifters and the Kirin canned coffee advertisements. Finally, Section 6 discusses the broader implications of the findings, reflects on the study's contributions to media and masculinity studies, and addresses its limitations while suggesting directions for future research.

The thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Japanese media representations contrast salaryman masculinity with non-regular employment masculinity, particularly in relation to work, caregiving, and fatherhood?
2. What do these contrasting portrayals reveal about tensions between hegemonic and emergent masculinities in contemporary Japanese society?

2 Background

Media representations of men and masculinity have long played a crucial role in shaping societal expectations and norms. From the stoic, strong male figures of early cinema to the more nuanced portrayals of modern television, media both reflects and influences how masculinity is understood and performed. In Japanese context, media representations of men have traditionally centered on the salaryman archetype, a white-collar worker who embodies loyalty, hard work, and economic provision and salarymen are a part of the collective national imaginary (Dasgupta, 2013). However, as societal and economic conditions have shifted, these representations have begun to evolve, offering new perspectives on what it means to be a man in contemporary Japan. For example, the lifetime employment and seniority-based wages are not as common as they are thought to be but mostly for those in the largest of companies and in a high position on the worker hierarchy (Allison, 1994). However, despite not being common for everyone, this image of the salaryman still enjoys a hegemonic status as it is the ultimate goal for a working man even if it is, in many cases, impossible to attain.

2.1 Idea of the Hegemonic Salaryman

The connection between masculinity and work has historically been very strong in Japan and being employed is considered as a crucial aspect in being a full-fledged member of the society (Hidaka, 2010).

As Gordon (1985) notes, Japan's economic system, which began valuing seniority and loyalty to the firm as early as the 1910s, laid the groundwork for the post-war working culture that elevated the salaryman to the status of the ideal masculine figure. By the post-war period, practices such as lifetime employment and seniority-based promotions had become normalized and became central to aspects of the salaryman (Allison, 1994). This workplace model not only influenced labor practices but also reinforced societal expectations of masculinity, embedding the salaryman archetype as a symbol of stability and success who provides for his family.

From the 1950s post-war period onwards, the typical Japanese family was known to be centred around a white-collar salaryman and a housewife who belonged to an

urban, middle-class family (Dasgupta, 2015). One of the main aspects of this family structure was the gendered ideology behind linking masculinity with the sphere of work and production while linking femininity with the sphere of household and consumption (Allison, 1994; Dasgupta, 2015; White, 2018). Despite the normalized and hegemonic status of the salaryman-and-housewife family type in the Japanese society, the reality was far more complex, and it became visible during the economic collapse of the 1990s (Dasgupta, 2015). The amount of non-regular workers grew by 5.67 million in ten years from 1992 to 2002 (Dasgupta, 2015).

Dasgupta (2015) highlights a growing disconnect between the hegemonic ideal of the husband/father as the *daikokubashira* (central supporting pillar in English) of the family and the socio-economic realities faced by especially younger Japanese men in the mid-2000s. Dasgupta (2015) notes that among unmarried men in their thirties and forties, those in regular employment are significantly more likely to marry (70%) compared to those in non-regular employment (41%). This disparity highlights the challenges faced by men in non-regular work, who are often unable to achieve the economic stability required for the traditional role of the *daikokubashira* and while the societal ideal of the *daikokubashira* remains strong, an increasing number of men in non-regular employment are excluded from this role due to unstable, non-permanent work (Dasgupta, 2015).

The financial crisis caused for some previously archetypal men who were middle-class and middle-management husbands and fathers to become unemployed which undermined their very identity and masculinity as they could not uphold the image of the *daikokubashira* anymore (Dasgupta, 2015). The changing economic situation challenges the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, as fewer men can meet the expectations of the traditional breadwinner model.

This thesis explores how media representations of masculinity in Japan reflect and challenge traditional ideals, particularly the salaryman archetype. By analyzing films like *Shoplifters* and advertising campaigns such as the Kirin canned coffee television advertisements, this study examines how media portrays the changing roles of men in Japanese society, from the traditional *daikokubashira* to alternative masculinities that reflect broader social and economic changes, such as irregular employment masculinity.

2.2 Nonregular Employment in Japan

The labor landscape in Japan has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, marked by a sharp increase in the percentage of the workforce engaged in short-term, unstable, and low-wage employment (Gill, 2015). It is important to explain the terms used in Japan for the nonregular employees:

- *Pāto*, part-time worker, can also work full hours.
- *Keiyaku shain*, contract worker.
- *Shokutaku*, contract specialist.
- *Arubaito*, *baito*, part-time worker, typically young people or students.
- *Furītā*, a person who still does insecure part-time work after graduating.
- *Haken rōdōsha*, dispatch worker who gets employed by a labour dispatch agency. Often precarious conditions, low wages and limited job security.
- *Hiyatoi rōdōsha*, a day labourer. Hired on a daily basis for manual labour, low wages, social stigma and extreme job insecurity.

As traditionally masculinity and a secure job with a salary has been essential in Japan for the identity of men (Dasgupta, 2015; Hidaka, 2010), the new and increasingly utilized categories have been challenging the idea of salaryman masculinity as the hegemonic form. Gill's (2015) book sheds light on how men who could not attain the idealized version of marriage, employment or housing are living on the streets of Yokohama, feeling ashamed for their failure to live up to the expectations of their family and society. Nonregular workers are disadvantaged in many ways compared to regular workers. Their wages are smaller and do not go up steadily as is the case with regular employees, they do not enjoy the same job security and can be cast away easily and in addition to these, they are also marginalized by the society (Gill, 2015).

In a society such as Japan where the breadwinner ideology has been extremely strong and 'normalcy' has been associated with men working full-time jobs while women

have the role of the housewife, the deterioration of the job market situation for young Japanese men has worrying implications (Brinton, 2011).

3 Defining Masculinity

Defining masculinity can be challenging, as it is not an innate or fixed trait, but a social construct shaped by cultural, historical, and societal norms (Connell, 2005). It encompasses the roles, behaviours, and attributes that a society deems appropriate for men, with these ideals varying significantly across time and place. For instance, masculine behaviour may include aggressiveness, confrontation, athleticism, and interest in sexual conquest, while unmasculine behaviour is defined in opposition to these traits. Connell (2005) argues that this concept of masculinity is rooted in the individualism that emerged in early-modern Europe alongside colonialism and capitalism. Moreover, masculinity is inherently relational as it exists in contrast to femininity, gaining meaning through this binary distinction.

3.1 Masculinity as a Social Construct

Connell has a critical view on the theory of normative masculinity. Normative masculinity essentially means that there is a set standard for men and how they should behave: masculinity is how men ought to be (Connell, 2005). This standard is enforced in media representations of men, for example the film stars like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood who are synonymous with traits like toughness, assertiveness and independence (Connell, 2005). The problem with treating these hyper-masculine characters that the actors played as normative masculinities is that almost no one can be like them as they are very unrealistic and unattainable (Connell, 2005). As Connell points out, this view of normative masculinity also creates a paradox with how we should view the majority of men who do not fit into this form of masculinity. Are the majority of men unmasculine? How can a norm be normative if no one can meet it? This topic is closely related to the topic of this thesis as similar normative representations of men and masculinity in television advertisements can be seen in Japan as well, salarymen being in the main role.

Judith Butler agrees with Connell's views of masculinity being a social construct. According to Butler's (1999) research, gender attributes are not expressions of an inner, pre-existing identity but performative acts that create the illusion of a stable gender identity. Through repeated social actions one confirms their gender attribute (Butler, 1999; Roberson & Suzuki, 2003). In the context of Japanese salaryman masculinity, this means that behaviors such as wearing a suit, working long hours,

and prioritizing loyalty to the company are not expressions of an inherent masculinity that they have but performances that construct the identity of a “salaryman.” These performances reinforce the hegemonic ideal of what it means to be a man in Japan while marginalizing alternative masculinities, showcasing the importance of work in the context of Japanese masculinity.

3.2 Multiple Masculinities

The concept of multiple masculinities has become central to understanding the complexity of gender relations, particularly as scholars have increasingly recognized the connection between gender, race, class, and other social factors (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As Connell (2005) argues, the recognition of multiple masculinities, such as black masculinity, working-class masculinity, or gay masculinity, is an important step in moving beyond a monolithic understanding of gender. However, this recognition risks oversimplification if it reduces masculinities to fixed categories or character types. For example, in any given group, such as working-class men or black men, there is significant diversity, including individuals who challenge traditional masculine norms, such as gay black men or effeminate factory workers (Connell, 2005).

In addition, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasize that gender orders construct multiple masculinities, which have differences depending on the cultures, classes, generations, and institutions. For example, in the context of Japan, Ishii-Kuntz (2003) traces the emergence of diverse masculinities in response to changing social practices, such as increased male involvement in child care. Similarly, Valdés and Olavarría (1998) demonstrate that even in culturally homogeneous countries like Chile, masculinities vary significantly by class and generation, highlighting the importance of analyzing masculinities as dynamic and context-dependent, rather than fixed or universal. Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that a focus on the relations between masculinities is crucial to maintaining a dynamic analysis, preventing the concept of multiple masculinities from collapsing into a simplistic character typology. This relational approach is particularly important for understanding hegemonic masculinity, which is not a fixed character type but a position that occupies the dominant role in a given pattern of gender relations and is always contestable (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

By applying the concept of multiple masculinities, it becomes possible to better understand the diversity of masculine identities and the ways in which they interact within specific social and cultural contexts. In the case of Japan, this framework enables an analysis of the hegemonic masculinity of the salaryman archetype in relation to alternative masculinities, such as non-regular workers, which challenge traditional norms and reflect broader social changes. This approach to masculinity provides a solid theoretical foundation for examining how gender and gender roles are constructed, performed, and contested in contemporary Japanese society.

3.3 Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity, a concept rooted in Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, refers to the dominant and culturally exalted form of masculinity in a given society (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As Connell (2005) explains, it is the configuration of gender practice that embodies the "currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy," ensuring the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not about individual power or wealth but about cultural ideals that are reinforced through institutions such as business, government, and the military. In the context of this study, the salaryman archetype of Japan embodies hegemonic masculinity, representing ideals such as corporate loyalty, providing for the family, personal sacrifice and emotional stoicism (Allison, 1994).

Hegemonic masculinity is distinguished from other masculinities, particularly subordinated masculinities, which are marginalized or devalued in relation to the dominant ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, while only a minority of men may fully enact hegemonic masculinity, it is normative, setting the standard for how men are expected to behave. Other men may benefit from patriarchy without fully embodying the hegemonic ideal, exhibiting what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) term complicit masculinity. These men support the dominant gender order through their alignment with cultural norms and institutional power, even if they do not actively enforce it. Hegemony, as Connell (2005) emphasizes, is maintained not through direct violence but through culture, institutions, and persuasion, such as media representations and workplace norms.

A key aspect of hegemonic masculinity is its historical and contextual nature. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, it is not a fixed or universal concept but emerges in specific social and historical circumstances and is subject to change. For example, the rise of alternative masculinities in Japan like non-regular workers challenges the dominance of the salaryman ideal. This dynamic nature of hegemonic masculinity, as Connell (2005) highlights, opens the possibility for more humane and less oppressive forms of masculinity to become hegemonic.

3.4 Hegemonic Masculinity as a Framework

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has also been widely applied in the study of media representations and sports, where it helps to analyze the interplay of cultural ideals and institutional power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, media representations often reinforce hegemonic masculinity through imagery that glorifies toughness and dominance, while sports such as body-contact, confrontational games serve as symbols of masculine ideals. In the case of Japan, media representations of the hegemonic salaryman masculinity would reinforce other qualities such as economic stability, hard work and family values. This concept allows us to better understand how masculinity is constructed, performed, and contested in contemporary societies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In the context of Japan, hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for analyzing the salaryman archetype, the connection between employment and masculinity and its alternatives in media representations, especially irregular employment masculinity. By applying this concept to the analysis of Japanese media, this study shows how traditional ideals are being challenged and redefined in response to social and economic changes. This framework enhances our understanding of media representations and gives a way to analyze gender, power, and identity in contemporary society.

While film is a subjective medium and cannot yield ultimate truths about society as it is a constructed representation rather than a direct reflection of reality, it remains a valuable object of study for its depictions, representations, and symbolic meanings (Salmi, 1993). By analyzing films and television advertisements, we can learn more of

how media shapes and reflects collective ideals, even if these portrayals are not always grounded in objective reality.

3.5 Previous Studies

Roberson's (2005) article, "Fight!! Ippatsu!! : 'Genki' Energy Drinks and the Marketing of Masculine Ideology in Japan," provides a critical case study of how popular media, specifically energy drink advertisements, construct and reinforce dominant masculine ideals in Japan. In the energy drink advertisements he analyzed, he found two types of representations of masculinity: a white-collar salaryman masculinity that is hegemonic in Japan and 'sportsman' type of masculinity that emphasizes physical strength, outdoors activities and sports.

The corporate salaryman in the advertisements is depicted as a middle-class, white-collar worker who relies on energy drinks to sustain long working hours and maintain mental sharpness while the 'sportsman' is portrayed as physically strong, competitive, and capable of overcoming challenges, often in outdoor or sports-related settings

Roberson (2005) used the framework of hegemonic masculinity in his article, noting that the focus on middle-class salarymen in the advertisements marginalize other types of masculinities whether or not it is being done intentionally. Roberson's (2005) analysis of energy drink advertisements aligns with the themes discussed in earlier sections of the thesis, particularly the construction of hegemonic masculinity in Japan and the role of media in shaping gender ideologies.

In a different study, White (2018) studied how the advertising of beer developed in Japan during the years of 1950 – 1996. His main focus was looking at how gendered the advertising of beer was and how gender was understood and represented by advertisers and critics throughout the postwar period in Japan. By using a modified version of Lynda Nead's discourse analysis White analyzed printed advertisements, television advertisements and writings by critics to find out how gender was constructed through advertisements in the postwar period.

As in the study of Roberson (2005), White (2018) also found that salarymen were the ideal customer for the beer advertisers in many cases. Salaryman masculinity became the hegemonic form of masculinity in the postwar era, replacing other masculinities

such as soldier or farmer masculinity as the ideals (White, 2018). According to White's (2018) analysis, this could also be seen in how the image of beer was constructed in relation to the salaryman – beer was something that a successful salaryman could enjoy as a reward, in addition to having a nice home and a family. While salarymen became accepted the societal archetype for men, women were increasingly represented as housewives and buyers of beer for consumption of men. This depiction reinforces the salaryman masculinity as the hegemonic masculinity in Japan as it became to be viewed as the norm, even though most of the working population were not considered salarymen (White, 2018).

While these studies are highly relevant to the thesis at hand, the focus of these studies and research is on middle-class salarymen as is with most of the studies about Japanese masculinity. There is a gap in research about Japanese media representations masculinities of men who are in irregular employment and do not belong to the hegemonic group of salarymen in Japan. My research fills this gap by examining how irregular workers are represented in Japanese media, challenging the dominant narrative of hegemonic masculinity.

In addition, there is limited research on how class intersects with masculinity in Japan, particularly in the context of irregular or precarious work. The salaryman archetype is inherently tied to middle-class identity, but irregular workers often occupy lower socioeconomic positions. This study explores how irregular workers negotiate their masculinity in relation to their class status and precarious employment and how it is in relation with the hegemonic model of the salaryman.

4 Methodology

This study investigates representations of masculinity in Japanese media, with a particular focus on contrasting non-regular employment masculinity with the hegemonic salaryman archetype. The analysis draws on two distinct datasets: the 2018 film *Shoplifters* (*Manbiki Kazoku*), directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda, which portrays the lives of a marginalized family engaged in irregular work and petty crime, and four television advertisements from 2013 for Kirin's canned coffee. The Kirin advertisements feature actor Yosuke Eguchi as a salaryman, embodying the idealized corporate worker navigating the pressures of modern Japanese society. These advertisements, with their emphasis on the salaryman archetype, provide a striking contrast to *Shoplifters*, which highlights the struggles and resilience of individuals outside the traditional employment system. Using thematic analysis, this research identifies and interprets recurring patterns and themes across these media texts, exploring how masculinity is constructed, performed, and contested in the context of both regular and non-regular employment. By comparing these representations, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which media reflects and shapes cultural discourses on gender, class, and work in contemporary Japan.


4.1 Method

The method used for this thesis is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one form of qualitative content analysis, and it is used for structuring the data early in the research process and to find commonly appearing features and attributes (Kallinen & Kinnunen, 2021). The recurring themes are usually inductively developed by the researcher when they have reviewed the material multiple times and became fully familiarized with it (Wheeler, 2022). Coding is a part of thematic analysis in which labels are generated to identify important points and main patterns in the data, making it possible to organize them under distinctive themes (Puusniekka & Saaranen-Kauppinen, 2006). Coding is useful and helpful as it unclutters the data and shows if it is related to the research questions (Puusniekka & Saaranen-Kauppinen, 2006).

The data was first watched and reviewed and relevant scenes to the topic of this thesis were identified. The scenes where masculinity and/or employment were identified were then screenshotted and described. Table 1 shows what the research notes

include: A. key image and time of the scene, B. description of the scene and C. identifiable codes.

Table 1. Example of the research notes

A. Scene 00:31:10	B. Description	C. Codes
	<p>After stealing some fishing rods, Osamu, Shota, and Yuri walk home. They are walking next to a river. Shota is on the foreground of the scene with Osamu and Yuri being at the back.</p>	<p>Work Fatherhood Shoplifting Masculinity Precarity</p>

As the data sample for this thesis is rather small, qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis work well for this kind of study. The method is flexible, and it provides a framework for going through the data. When the data sample is narrow, it is important to try to understand it as deeply as possible and to identify the themes and narratives within it which is why the method of thematic analysis was chosen for this thesis. The methodology also has some drawbacks. The researcher has to have enough observational skills to recognize the relevant scenes in the material, visual material in this case, and to analyse the data in a way that makes it coherent. The method can also be slow if films need to be watched several times to gain a deep enough understanding of the material.

Thematic analysis offers a highly suitable methodological approach for examining representations of Japanese masculinity in film and television advertisements. Its flexibility and systematic framework make it particularly effective for identifying and analysing recurring patterns within media portrayals of masculinity in audiovisual media. By following the clear step-by-step guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), this study ensures transparency and rigor in its methodology. This approach addresses concerns about consistency and standardization, as highlighted by scholars like Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012). As a result, thematic analysis not only aligns with the research objectives of exploring how masculinity is constructed and contested in Japanese advertisements and film but also offers a

reliable and repeatable framework for researching the subtle cultural meanings within these media texts.

As the data is visual, the systemic collection of screenshots and giving them descriptions made the research process more structured and clearer as can be seen from the Table 1 above. The data could easily be revisited without a rewatch of the entire film or television advertisement series and the material could be sorted under relevant themes, making the interpretation quicker and more structurally sound.

As the material was being analysed, codes (section C in Table 1) were used to sort the data under suitable themes. In the film *Shoplifters* the codes were alternative masculinities, family dynamics, financial struggles, and fatherhood. In the case of television advertisements, the codes were hard work, gender roles, personal sacrifice and provider roles. While the notes of the material are quite structured, the analysis (Chapter 5) in this thesis will be presented in a more fluid manner and will focus on the themes identified in the data. The aim is to answer the research question:

1. How do Japanese media representations contrast salaryman masculinity with non-regular employment masculinity, particularly in relation to work, caregiving, and fatherhood?

Finally, four thematic categories were created and the film-specific themes and the advertisement-specific themes that both materials shared were grouped under them. The main themes were 1. work and masculine identity, 2. family dynamics, and 3. societal expectations. The findings will be presented and compared through these themes in the discussion (Chapter 6), and the second research question is answered using the themes:

2. What do these contrasting portrayals reveal about tensions between hegemonic and emergent masculinities in contemporary Japanese society?

4.2 Data

There are two sets of data used in this thesis. The first set of data is the 2018 film *Shoplifters* (*Manbiki Kazoku* in Japanese) directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda. The second set of data consists of a series of Japanese TV advertisements from around mid-2010s that advertise canned coffee and feature a salaryman in the main role.

Marriage is seen as an important expectation for the salaryman who is a symbol of masculinity. He is expected to work diligently for the sake of the family and the children, to even prioritize work before family time. The advertisements prominently reflect stereotypical gender roles within the family structure. These specific advertisements were selected for their depiction of the idealized salaryman in Japanese society—a man who dedicates himself to providing for his family and making personal sacrifices for their collective well-being. This representation contrasts with the film *Shoplifters*, which challenges traditional notions of family and fatherhood through its unconventional portrayal of family relationships.

The lengths of the advertisements are ranging from 0:45 minutes to 1:00 minute. The advertisements promote a canned coffee of the beverage company Kirin that is most well known for their production of beer. While coffee is usually advertised as something to be enjoyed slowly, canned coffee is different in that aspect as it is more of a functional drink, mostly consumed for its energizing effect rather than delicious taste. This can also be seen in the advertisements, as the salarymen get the needed burst of motivation and determination to keep on working after drinking the coffee. In the advertisements there is a catch phrase “心に火を, *kokoro ni hi o*” translating roughly to “light a fire in your heart”. It could be argued that the advertisements are primarily aimed at working men since all of the main characters in the advertisements are salarymen.

These pieces of visual media were selected for this thesis as they all include themes of employment and masculinity as will be explained later in this thesis. The time frame when they were created is also relevant as the financial situation of Japan during the 2010s had suffered losses due to bad economic situation and the 2011 Tohoku earthquake (Danninger & Kang, 2011). Both the film and the advertisements are set in contemporary times, and this thesis similarly centers on modern-day Japanese society. The film and the advertisements were easily accessible – the film was watched online, and the advertisements could be found on YouTube. The film has English subtitles, and the advertisements were freely translated by the author of this thesis.

4.2.1 Shoplifters

The film *Shoplifters* takes place in the suburbs of Tokyo, and it is set in the same year as it was made in 2018. The director of the film, Hirokazu Kore-eda, is a very well-known Japanese film director known for films such as *Nobody knows* (2004), *Still Walking* (2008) and *Like Father, Like Son* (2013) for which he won the Jury Prize at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. For the film *Shoplifters*, he won the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival.

The film follows the life of an unconventional family unit that consists of the father Osamu, mother Nobuyo, their adopted son and daughter Shota and Lin, Nobuyo's "sister" Aki and finally the grandmother Hatsue. The situation of the family is rather precarious as Osamu and Nobuyo are irregular workers with low pay and hours and Aki works as a sort of sex worker in an erotic club. Osamu works on a construction site as a day-laborer and Nobuyo works as a part-timer at an industrial laundry. While the adults in the family bring in some income, the family mainly lives off of the pension of Hatsue's deceased husband. The family's poor economic situation is the reason why Osamu and the children resort to shoplifting to make ends meet. In addition to shoplifting, Shota and Lin do not go to school like other children their age. Osamu says that only kids who cannot study at home go to school, an anti-establishment attitude that can be observed in many parts of the film. The main narrative of the film follows the struggles of the family, and how do they manage despite their financial woes, difficult work situations and illegal activities.

The film starts with a scene where Osamu and Shota are doing a routine grocery store visit except they are shoplifting the goods, not paying for them. On their way back home, they see a young girl, Yuri, out in the cold and take her with them. While she was originally supposed to come to the family house just for dinner and some warmth, they notice signs of abuse on her. As they are returning her home, her family situation becomes evident as they hear her parents fighting and her father exclaiming that he did not want her in the first place. They decide to keep her and change her name from Yuri to Lin and cut her hair to change her looks. Lin integrates into the family and Osamu and Shota teach her to shoplift with them. The disappearance of Lin is starting to attract attention and as they keep stealing to make ends meet, Shota begins to question the morality of it and if it is okay to teach Lin to steal. Eventually

Shota gets intentionally caught stealing to protect Lin and the secrets of the family start to unravel. As the police get involved, Osamu and Nobuyo are arrested, Lin is returned to her real family, and Shota is placed into a children's home. The film ends on a somber note, Shota finally calls Osamu his father for the first time although Osamu does not hear this.

While the unconventional family has no blood relations, their bond is warm and caring. Osamu and his struggles with fatherhood is a major theme in the film. As he cannot be the main provider for the family as men are expected to be in Japan and because of the children are not biologically his own, he dreams of having their own place with Shota calling him "dad". In contrast to the typical salaryman, Osamu has no steady income, house of his own, traditional family or future prospects. He is a complex character – while his actions such as the shoplifting and the "adopting" of Lin are definitely illegal, he does them to provide and to protect his family. As an irregular worker, his position in the Japanese society is marginalized and his actions can be seen as a response to his situation as he cannot make enough money from his work, he must turn to other ways of making ends meet.

Osamu has a close connection with all the family members. While Nobuyo and Osamu are not married, their relationship is similar to that of a married couple. They joke together and support the family emotionally and financially. Nobuyo does not judge Osamu for his illegal activities but accepts him as he is and works hard to take care of the family. Osamu describes their relationship to Aki as being more emotional than physical and the scene where they make love makes it clear that having sex is very rare in their relationship.

Osamu's relationship with Shota has the elements of a typical son-father dynamic, but the difference comes from what he is teaching Shota. For example, Osamu is teaching Shota how to survive, telling him about his changing body as Shota is approaching puberty and showing him love and affection. Whereas a typical father would most likely help their child with homework or playing sports with them, Osamu is teaching Shota how to steal. Shoplifting becomes their way of bonding, and they do it by themselves before Lin is adopted to the family. When Osamu takes Lin with them to steal, Shota feels that his relationship with Osamu is threatened. Noticing the change in Shota's behavior, Osamu asks him why he does not want Lin to join them, and Shota answers that it is more fun with just the boys.

As they adopt Lin from her abusive family, Osamu makes sure that she gets enough to eat and that she learns how to function in the family as everyone needs to have a role. Hers is to help with the work that is, of course, shoplifting. While Osamu shows her love and caring, the traditionally gendered role of childcare is still very present in this family despite the family being everything but traditional in many other ways. Nobuyo and Aki are expected to take care of Lin, bathing her and doing her hair, for example.

Main themes of the film include masculinity, fatherhood, family relations, employment, social status and economic insecurity.

4.2.2 Series of Canned Coffee Advertisements from Kirin

The Kirin canned coffee commercials serve as a valuable dataset for this thesis because they provide a clear, culturally resonant representation of Japan's hegemonic salaryman masculinity that is a central focus of this study. These advertisements were selected for three key reasons: (1) their longevity and popularity make them influential in shaping societal perceptions of masculine ideals, (2) their repetitive portrayal of corporate loyalty and self-sacrifice reinforces normative expectations of masculine behaviour, and (3) their contrast with *Shoplifters'* depiction of irregular work allows for a critical examination of how media either upholds or challenges dominant gender norms and hegemonic masculinity. By analysing these advertisements, the thesis studies the persistence of postwar masculine ideals in contemporary Japanese media, even as real-world economic conditions make them increasingly difficult to achieve. Their corporate origin (Kirin Holdings, a major Japanese beverage company) also highlights how commercial interests perpetuate normative gender roles, positioning the advertisements in contrast to *Shoplifters'* subversive, independent film perspective. The advertisements aired in 2013-2015 and their view count on YouTube range from 26 000 to 152 000 views.

4.2.3 Kirin Advertisement 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRaGcUyM4bY>

The first advertisement shows a salaryman father working while his wife is home taking care of the children and doing household chores. The salaryman in this

advertisement has a supportive role in his company. He is doing deliveries, shifting through boxes in the warehouse and pushing carts for others.

While the salaryman is at work, his wife's day involves feeding and caring for the children, cycling to drop one child at daycare, working a part-time shift at a florist shop, and returning home to prepare meals and complete the laundry. The advertisement ends with the salaryman opening the can of coffee, taking a sip and walks off to presumably continue working

4.2.4 Kirin Advertisement 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQaspYzQNow>

The second advertisement depicts the salaryman father as he talks about roles in his son's baseball team but also more generally of roles in the workplace and life. The salaryman is asked to do something, presumably fix a mistake in a delivery. He then finds some items in the warehouse and delivers them to a factory worker.

The factory worker hands him a canned coffee as thanks for helping them, saying, "Thank you for always helping out." The advertisement ends with the salaryman drinking the coffee on the side of a sports field, watching a child practice pitching with a man before getting back into his car and returning to work.

4.2.5 Kirin Advertisement 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIyetblIp7g>

The third advertisement starts with the salaryman looking on as children play football as he is taking a break from work, drinking a canned coffee while sitting on a bench next to the football field. In the office he makes phone calls, does inventory keeping in the warehouse and travels to a harbour to meet with a man who is presumably a harbour foreman to discuss something work related.

The salaryman is taking care of changing slides of the slideshow while his superiors present and waving for a taxi and opening the car door for them. He is later seen to be guiding his junior coworker in the office late at night.

4.2.6 Kirin Advertisement 4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ2S3HNynIk>

The salaryman in this advertisement travels to his work via public transport with his suit on and changes to a white construction worker's outfit once he gets to the worksite where he is working as a supervisor. He instructs other workers how to do their work and coordinates with his coworkers. The advertisement shows the salaryman working at the site while it also depicts his father doing manual labour in a small workshop. At the end, the salaryman is taking a break while sitting down and drinking canned coffee, and after his break ends, he stands up determined and motivated to continue working. This scene is played simultaneously to his father taking a break and standing up at the same time, both men exclaiming “よしや (*yosha*)”, translating roughly to “all right”.

5 Analysis

This chapter focuses on the analysis of the film *Shoplifters* and of the series of canned coffee television advertisements by Kirin. The objective of this chapter is to look at how these two different media showcase employment and work and how masculinity is tied to work in Japan. The chapter has two sections, one for the film and one for the advertisements.

5.1 Shoplifters

The main themes that emerge when examining key scenes from *Shoplifters* are fatherhood and parenthood, irregular employment and masculinity, gender roles, and the value of work in Japanese society. The film critiques conventional family structures and employment norms, showing how those who do not fit in the norm navigate identity, family relations, and survival. It also explores how masculinity is shaped by work, and how characters resist or unconsciously conform to societal expectations, even while living outside hegemonic norms.

5.1.1 Irregular Employment Masculinity



Picture 1. 00:01:33. The opening scene of the film where Osamu and Shota go shoplifting at a grocery store.

Picture 2. 00:03:18. On the way back home, Osamu and Shota stop to buy croquettes from a small food stall.

Picture 3. 00:05:58. After Osamu teases the grandmother, she retorts by saying that despite living off her pension, he is so unreliable.

The opening scene of the film (Picture 1) is very important for understanding how the dynamic between Osamu and Shota work. Osamu is a father figure for Shota and at the same time he is teaching him how to live and survive in his world by shoplifting

and stealing. When they go shoplifting, they assist each other, block the vision of a store employee so that the other one can steal without being seen and have nonverbal communication in the store. This nonverbal communication shows that they've done this many times before, and that Osamu has instilled this behaviour in Shota almost like a skill or trade. In a conventional family, skills passed from father to son would be academic success, sports, or career advice. Here, Osamu offers what he knows, survival tactics.

The teaching dynamic is an important aspect of Osamu's character and a way for him to be masculine as he cannot fit into the mold of normalized Japanese salaryman masculinity. Traditionally men as the heads of their families have been the breadwinners, the '*daikokubashira*' (a supporting pillar), but Osamu is not a provider for his family, at least not in the conventional sense. By teaching Shota how to survive in this world, he is in his own way able to reclaim some of his masculinity.

Osamu is eager to teach Shota as can be seen from Picture 2, where they stop to get some croquettes, one of the rare scenes in the film where they pay for something. Osamu is telling Shota about a 'crusher', a tool he uses to break windows while being very proud of his knowledge. A parent telling their son about their work and teaching them about it is very normal, but in this scene, the setting is different as Osamu is teaching Shota about criminal activities. This is a key moment where Osamu's masculinity is expressed not through dominance or authority, but through knowledge and resourcefulness. Even though what he is doing is illegal and sets Shota up for a life of crime, he sees himself as passing on wisdom. The way they are constantly struggling for money can also be seen from Shota's answer to Osamu's words as his first question is to ask, "How much does it cost?"

In the scene of Picture 3, the grandmother's offhand comment directly challenges Osamu's masculinity and status in the family. As Osamu takes her croquette and gives it to Yuri, she says to Osamu that, "You are so unreliable even though you live off my pension" to which Osamu retorts to with a defensive "Shut up" and his cheerful mood changes into a sulk. In a conventional Japanese household, the older generations are supported by the younger ones, especially male breadwinners. But here, the structure is inverted, and this reversal of roles damages his sense of masculinity. Osamu is not only unable to provide financially, but he also depends on an elderly woman's income for survival. This inversion strips him of the normative

masculine authority he might otherwise claim. His inability to fulfil the provider role destabilizes his identity as a man and a father, making him visibly uncomfortable and emotionally reactive when he is reminded of this.

While Osamu has his own way of being masculine, he still feels the pressure of the society and the need to conform to the hegemonic masculinity even if he does not realize it himself. This can be seen from the way he imagines scenarios where he is living with Shota in a normal apartment and having Shota refer to him as his father. Pictures 4 and 5 showcase this point:



Picture 4. 00:16:39. While working, Osamu walks into an unfinished apartment and pretends that it is his and Shota's home. He calls for Shota, saying, "Shota, I'm home!"

Picture 5. 00:44:08. After watching a father and a son playing with a football outside, Osamu fills up a plastic bag with air and kicks it, imitating Shota saying, "Dad, you are so cool."

The incomplete apartment in the scene of Picture 4 symbolizes a dream of a steady job, owning a home and being economically stable while at the same time emphasizing how far Osamu is from that ideal. By momentarily pretending that the unfinished apartment is his home, Osamu is indulging in a fantasy of conventional success and masculinity, which in contemporary Japanese society is bound to homeownership, stable employment, and having a family.

In the scene of Picture 5, Osamu is looking at the father and son playing outside from a cluttered and dimly lit kitchen, creating a contrast between the warm, sunny outside and the dark and messy inside of the house. The inside of the house feels cramped and disordered, reflecting both the family's precarious social position and

Osamu's internal struggle with his role as a father, the window almost acting like a barrier between Osamu and the normative version of fatherhood that is presented outside.

From these pictures, it is clear to see that Osamu dreams about a normal life where his fatherhood of Shota would be recognized by the society and by Shota. He feels jealousy towards the father playing outside with his son with a football. As he does not own a football, he inflates a plastic bag with air to imitate a football and plays with it as if trying to prove that he can do it also. While Osamu's jealousy is not directly said or conveyed, it can be seen through his behaviour in this scene. He is watching the father and son have a very normative interaction of playing with a football and then imitates it privately. Just as in Picture 4, this scene also shows the viewers a fantasy and a projection of a life that Osamu wishes he had. He is creating a scenario where he is an admired father.

These moments show how he needs validation not only from society but from Shota himself, and how his irregular status and life on the margins prevent him from achieving the kind of respected masculinity tied to being a publicly recognized and admired father.



Picture 6. 00:21:25. After Osamu hurt his leg at work his coworker brings him home.



Picture 7. 00:25:16. Nobuyo and Osamu have a talk about their job situations.

The precarious nature of the work Osamu and Nobuyo do can be easily seen from Pictures 6 and 7. In Picture 6, Osamu has had a work accident and his coworker, who

works fulltime, is dropping him off. When the family learns of his accident, their first question is about money and if Osamu can get workers' compensation. Osamu's coworker probably knows that he is not eligible for it as he is a day labourer, but he does not give a straight answer which the family takes as a "yes." The grandmother is especially pleased at this as can be seen from her face and Nobuyo even steps on Osamu's other leg and jokingly comments, "So it would have been better if you broke it rather than twisted it". This highlights how, for the family, survival and making money come before even their own well-being.

The discussion that takes place in the scene of Picture 7, comes after Nobuyo's workplace has adopted a policy called "work-share" where the workers share the hours they work as the company cannot pay them all anymore. They also talk about how Osamu did not receive the workers' compensation for his injury after all. As they talk, they express longing for stable, full-time employment like Osamu's coworker who gave him a ride home. When Nobuyo asks if that man is a full-timer and Osamu says "Yes", she responds, "So lucky to be a full-timer..." This interaction shows their want for financial stability and a respectable status in society's eyes even though live outside the norms, they still measure their values on the same scale as the rest of the society. Osamu's wounded sense of masculinity can also be seen in this scene as he complains about how the grandmother acts as if she is earning the money herself even though it is her late husband's pension that she is getting. He talks about how much the grandmother's monthly pension is and when Nobuyo says that it is actually her late husband's pension that she is getting, Osamu says that "She talks big as if she's the one earning that money. We are the ones taking care of her!" This implies that Osamu is struggling with the idea that he is not the main breadwinner of the family and seeks to reconfirm his worth and place in the family by emphasizing that he is also taking care of the grandmother and at the same time undermining the grandmother's role in providing.



Picture 8. 01:05:16. After eating cold noodles, Osamu and Nobuyo have sex.

Picture 9. 01:00:32. In the sex shop Aki works at, she has a regular customer who is skipping work to be with her.

In the scene of Picture 8, Osamu is very pleased with himself after having sex, and asks Nobuyo multiple times “I did it, right?” This seems like a brief period of normalcy for them as having sex is seen as very normal in a relationship, even though theirs is, as they themselves say, not normal. He is seeking validation, approval and confirmation of his masculinity from Nobuyo, since being able to and having sex is normatively considered to be innate to men.

Osamu doesn't usually get to feel masculine in the hegemonic way as he does not have a stable job, he does not provide for the family in the legal or financial sense, and he is looked down on by society. But in this private moment, he gets a small chance to feel confident and manly. It shows how fragile his masculinity really is, and how much he still wants to be seen as someone who fulfills that conventional male role, even though their life as a family is far from normative.

This shows how fragile masculinity becomes when the usual pillars like employment and social status are missing. Osamu isn't aggressive or dominant, instead, his masculinity is quiet, emotional, and often built on needing reassurance. Even something as private as sex becomes a way for him to hold on to a sense of self-worth in a world that constantly tells him he's failed. While the analysis of this film focuses on fictional characters, for many men who cannot get steady employment or have lost their jobs, the struggle with masculinity is reality.

Another character who is struggling with his self-worth and masculinity is the regular customer Aki meets in the scene of Picture 9. The customer visits Aki in the middle of the day, which suggests that he might be unemployed or working irregularly. Aki notices that his fists are wounded and that he has been punching himself, likely out of self-hatred. He seems to measure his own value by how society sees him, and not being able to live up to those expectations makes him turn that frustration inward. Just like Osamu rebuilds his masculinity through the makeshift family he has, this man's only connection seems to be from a paid transaction with Aki. His lack of self-worth is in line with the findings of Hidaka (2010) in that men who fall outside of stable employment are perceived (and perceive themselves) as lesser than the ones who have a steady job.

5.1.2 Challenging the Normative Definitions of Fatherhood and Parenthood



Picture 10. 00:06:22. Osamu and Shota bring Yuri to their home for dinner after finding her. They discover that she has been abused at home.

Picture 11. 00:40:00. The family learns that Yuri's disappearance has become a national news story. After briefly panicking, they decide to keep her, cut her hair and to call her Lin in the future.

Picture 12. 01:13:21. Osamu talks to Shota about his changing body and assures him that it is normal to like breasts and have erections.

The film challenges conventional definitions of family, suggesting that parenthood is defined not by biology or legality, but by care, presence, and emotional responsibility. In the film, we see how characters take on parental roles despite not having blood ties, forming a makeshift family based on mutual need and affection.

The main family in *Shoplifters* is very unconventional as none of them have full-time jobs or enough money to be living alone. Despite their own struggles, they have gathered together and act very much like a normal family – they bicker, argue, care

for each other and have forged their own ties and bonds. In the scene of Picture 10, Yuri joins the family for the first time for dinner as her own real family had left her outside alone even though it is winter, and she is still in preschool. As they are eating dinner, the grandmother notices that she has many scars and wounds and has been most likely abused by her own family. When she is asked about it, she is taught to lie that she fell by her real parents. Nobuyo wants to send her back home as soon as possible, since they are already low on resources. As Osamu and Nobuyo are taking her back to her real parents, they hear the father throwing glasses and striking the mother. The mother exclaims that the father is never home, and the father accuses her of cheating and doubts if Yuri is even his daughter, which emphasizes the different view of parenthood and family between the two families.

Learning about Yuri's real parents gets Nobuyo to change her mind, and she lets Yuri join the family. This scene emphasizes one of the key arguments of the film which is that biology alone does not make someone into a parent.

This scene also shows the difficult living situation of the family. They are already tight on money, having to shoplift for food and daily necessities, they are sharing beds to have enough space for everyone and what to outsiders seem like kidnapping a child can only bring more problems to their lives. By doing this, the film asks us to consider what is considered a good parent or a good family, especially in the case of Japan where the salaryman model has been so dominant for the last centuries. In the conventional salaryman family, the father would not be around too much as working was the main focus and the single most important thing. By contrast, Osamu's household exists on the margins. No one holds a full-time job. Osamu occasionally works construction but relies heavily on shoplifting and the grandmother's pension. Nobuyo works occasional shifts in a laundry business under precarious conditions. Despite lacking financial resources and legal authority, they have an emotional connection that is often absent or lacking in the normative salaryman model.

In the scene of Picture 11, the family learns that Yuri has been reported missing and the story about her has become of national interest. Rather than returning her, they decide to cut her hair, give her a new name (Lin), and fully adopt her into the household. This moment reflects the family's defiance of societal norms and their commitment to creating their own version of family. Osamu asks Yuri if she will return to her real home when Nobuyo rejects this idea and says to Yuri "You will stay

here, right?”, marking the shift from an ambiguous and temporary arrangement to something that is actively outside of the societal norms and laws.

Their decision is not driven by selfishness, but by a recognition that Yuri is safer and more loved with them than with her biological parents. While they act mostly out of love for Yuri, they are also afraid of the consequences for them if she would return to her family as it would most likely mean that they would get caught, leaving them no choice but to keep avoiding authorities and not seek help.

In Picture 12, Osamu talks to Shota about puberty and the changes in his body, reassuring him that it’s normal to feel desire and to have erections. It is an intimate and honest conversation, one typically associated with conventional father-son relationships, and it shows the emotional depth of their bond. Osamu and Shota are also physically very close in this scene, something that is not so normalized in a conventional father-son relationship at their ages. The emotional and physical closeness greatly contrasts with salaryman masculinity that is characterized by its emotional and physical distance.



Picture 15. 00:43:43. Shota, Yuri, Nobuyo and the grandmother walk together as they discuss bonds and choosing their own families.

Picture 16. 01:11:27. The whole family gathers on the veranda to catch a glimpse of fireworks, but they can only hear the sounds they make.

Picture 17. 00:31:10. After stealing some fishing rods, Osamu, Shota, and Yuri walk home.

In the scene from Picture 15, Shota asks Yuri “Uncle saved you, right? Do you like Auntie and Grandma? So, you can stand it?” When Yuri answers, “I can” Nobuyo is visibly pleased and wonders if that means Yuri chose them to be her family. The

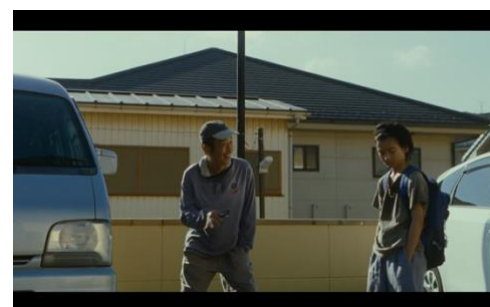
grandmother responds by saying that she, too, chose them. This moment highlights a shift away from traditional family structures based on blood ties or obligation and instead centres the idea of family as something chosen, based on emotional connection, mutual care, and shared experience.

For children like Yuri and Shota, who have both been abandoned or mistreated by their biological families, this idea of choosing and being chosen is especially significant. Their closeness is seen throughout the film, for example in Picture 16 where the whole family huddles together on the veranda to try to catch a glimpse of fireworks they can only hear. These shared moments, like going to the beach and playing in the waves, show that their bond is not defined by legal or blood-related status but by care and joy. They live in the shadows of society, without legal recognition, economic security, or access to the privileges of more “visible” families. The veranda is a literal edge space between inside and outside, reflects their liminal status as they do not fully belong to mainstream society, nor are they completely detached from it. They exist in the cracks. Yet despite this marginal position, the family is tightly clustered, physically close, and emotionally connected. Their warmth contrasts with the cold distance of the unseen world outside.

Even though Osamu lacks a stable job and is excluded from conventional ideals of Japanese masculinity, he still finds other ways to express it. Unlike the salaryman model, which links masculinity to full-time work and financial provision, Osamu’s masculinity is grounded in emotional presence, caregiving, and adaptability while also being physically affectionate. He does not follow authority or society’s rules, but instead does what he believes is right for the people he cares about. Teaching Shota and Yuri how to shoplift may be illegal, but it also reflects how he prepares them for survival in a society that has already failed them. In doing so, he becomes a father figure and gains the trust and affection of the children.

After stealing the fishing rods, Shota is conflicted about the role of Yuri in their work as can be seen from his body language: he looks down, his hands are in his pockets, and he has taken some distance from Osamu and Yuri. Shota protests the addition of Yuri into their team by saying, “She’s in the way” to which Osamu reinforces her belonging to their family by quickly answering, “Don’t say that, she is your little sister.” Shota rejects this by saying, “She’s not my little sister” and runs off. For Osamu, calling Yuri Shota’s “little sister” is his way of giving structure and legitimacy

to their unconventional family. It helps him create a sense of belonging and stability in a situation where they have none. Since society does not recognize their family, using these labels allows Osamu to show care and take on a role he otherwise could not have.



Picture 18. 00:53:23. A shop keeper tells Shota to not let Yuri steal and gives them a popsicle.

Picture 19. 01:10:00. As Osamu is showing off doing magic tricks, Shota tells Osamu that the shopkeeper told him to not make his little sister steal.

Picture 20. 01:25:38. Osamu is looking for things to steal inside cars, but Shota is having a moral conflict about stealing.

The shopkeeper's words and guidance in the scene of Picture 18 was very influential for Shota. Despite Shota stealing from his shop, the shopkeeper seems to understand their situation and feels bad for them, seeing as he does not notify the authorities and even gives them a popsicle as he sends them on their way, saying, "Don't make your sister do it" while doing the little ritual Shota always does before stealing. As he knows what the ritual is, the shopkeeper has known that Shota is stealing from him for a long time but has been allowing it most likely out of pity. For Shota, in addition to Osamu, this man might just be the only other man who has ever tried to guide and teach Shota. Even though he does not say much to Shota, he is respectful and even kind towards him despite Shota shoplifting from his shop. This creates a moral dilemma in Shota's head as Osamu's teachings are opposite to what the man just told him. From this moment onwards, Shota starts to doubt the way of living he learned from Osamu.

In the scene where Shota tells Osamu about what the shopkeeper said, Osamu is doing magic tricks to entertain the kids. He seems cheerful, joking and showing off

like a fun and carefree father, but his mood changes instantly when Shota tells him about the shopkeeper. Osamu reacts dismissively, saying that Yuri is still too young to steal, but says nothing about stealing itself or the morality of it. As Osamu gets up to search for a deck of cards, Shota picks up a small magic pellet that opens into a red cloth, a cheap magician's prop. This moment is symbolic as Shota starts to view Osamu's way of life as a kind of trick that only works if it is not known by others. For Osamu, the words of the shopkeeper pose a threat because stealing is the only thing he knows how to teach Shota and his sense of fatherhood and masculinity tie into it as well. His position and status are undermined if a person from outside of their bubble criticizes his teachings.

In the scene of Picture 20, Shota openly disagrees with Osamu about breaking into a car and stealing a bag. Shota refuses to help and waits by the stairs. In this scene, Shota asks, "Don't these belong to someone?" to which Osamu dismissively replies, "So what?" The setting in Pictures 18 and 20 is important for understanding Shota's mind. He does not directly look at either the shopkeeper or Osamu, but looks away or at the ground, as he feels conflicted about what he is doing. The shopkeeper looks at Shota with a blank, almost emotionless face, conveying that the situation is serious. In contrast, when Shota reacts with withdrawal, Osamu is trying to lighten the mood and crack jokes with him, bending down to his level and asking, "You want to try this too?" while attempting to hand the crusher over to him.



Picture 21. 01:25:43. Osamu looks on as Shota walks away when he is about to break into a car.



Picture 22. 01:26:30. After stealing a bag from the car, Shota refuses a fist bump with Osamu.

For Osamu, Shota's rejection of his way of living and teachings hit hard as can be seen from his reaction to Shota refusing to break the car window (Picture 21). His face shows feelings of confusion and worry as Shota who before has always listened to and helped him, now turned his back on him. As they are running away after Osamu steals the bag, Shota questions Osamu if he was just trying to steal something when he first found Shota living in a car. When Osamu tries to deny it and reaches out for a familiar fist bump, Shota refuses (Picture 22). After Shota's refusal, Osamu makes a frustrated grunt and says, "Come on, let's go!"

It is a crack in his ideal world where he and Shota are not only a father and a son, but partners in crime. Teaching Shota how to steal, how to live on the margins of society, has been Osamu's way of reclaiming a sense of purpose, masculinity, and control in his life where he does not have social standing or steady work. It is how he justifies his place in the family and in Shota's life. In his mind, Shota is not only rejecting the stealing but also rejecting Osamu as his father figure and pulling away from the lifestyle Osamu has taught him.



Picture 23. 01:38:30. Osamu is questioned by the police on why he taught the children to shoplift.

Picture 24. 01:42:43. A police questions Nobuyo and her ideas about motherhood.

Picture 25. 01:34:54. The real parents are interviewed by media after Yuri is found.

At the end of the film comes the biggest difference in viewpoints, as Osamu and Nobuyo are interrogated by the police for their lifestyle choices and the so-called "kidnapping" of the children. In Picture 23, Osamu is questioned about why he taught the children to shoplift. The officer sees this act in black-and-white terms as criminal, irresponsible, and damaging. But the viewer who has spent the film with this family, understands that Osamu's actions come from desperation, not malice. Shoplifting in the film is not presented as a thrill or an act of rebellion, but as a survival tactic in a system that has no space for people like them. The law does not make space for nuance or for the emotional bonds built outside of legal frameworks.

In this scene, Osamu looks extremely tired and resigned to his fate as he is being scrutinized in the dark interrogation room. The detective asks Osamu "Didn't you feel guilty about teaching the children to shoplift?" to which Osamu quietly replies, "I...don't know anything else that I could them." The reply has no feeling of defiance or confidence, just a sense of defeat. This moment marks the symbolic dismantling of his masculinity and fatherhood in the eyes of institutional authority.

In contrast, the scene of Picture 25, where the real parents are being interviewed by the media has a very different setting. They are outside in daylight, in formal clothing and there is clearly great interest in what they have to say, suggesting social respectability and legal authority, despite their earlier neglect of Yuri. When they come out, the media thanks them for doing the interview and asks easy questions such as what did she eat yesterday.

Similarly, in Picture 24, Nobuyo is questioned about her role as a mother. The officer challenges her idea of motherhood, framing it through legality and biology, as in her opinion the only valid form of motherhood is a biological one. Nobuyo, who has clearly loved and cared for Yuri more than her biological parents ever did, is not seen as a mother in the eyes of the law. Her position is further weakened by her class and employment status, because she is not a "respectable" full-time worker or housewife, and so she is not granted the respect that might come with those roles. Instead, she is treated as an outsider, both in society and now also as a mother figure.

The double standards of how Nobuyo and Osamu's family is treated is made especially clear in Picture 25, when Yuri's biological parents are interviewed by the media. Despite clear evidence that they neglected and abused their child, they are not

punished or even questioned in the same way Osamu and Nobuyo are. The law recognizes their rights as parents simply because of biology, ignoring the emotional and physical harm they caused to Yuri. As they are also functioning members of the society, they are given more leeway. By contrast, Osamu and Nobuyo who gave Yuri love, food, safety, and care are treated as kidnappers.

5.2 Kirin Advertisements

The Kirin canned coffee advertisements present an idealized portrayal of the Japanese salaryman: a hardworking, committed man who finds brief solace in a can of coffee during his long workday. In these commercials, masculinity is closely tied to endurance, dedication to work, and quiet self-sacrifice. The salaryman is shown as a pillar of society, respected and valued, even if personally exhausted. Gender roles are clearly visible: while the man shoulders the professional burden, his wife stays at home, managing housework and childcare. This division reinforces a normative, patriarchal family structure where public life and productivity are associated with masculinity, and domesticity with femininity. Compared to *Shoplifters*, which challenges these societal ideals and presents alternative models of fatherhood and masculinity, the Kirin advertisements uphold and showcase the hegemonic norm. Through this contrast, the advertisements offer a useful lens for understanding how media constructs and sustains a mainstream image of masculine identity in Japan.

5.2.1 Kirin Advertisement 1



Picture 1. 00:04. The salaryman is delivering some items to the factory worker, bowing as he hands them over.



Picture 2. 00:08. The salaryman leaves to work while the mother is busy taking care of the children.



Picture 3. 00:18. The salaryman is at work, pushing a cart filled with boxes.

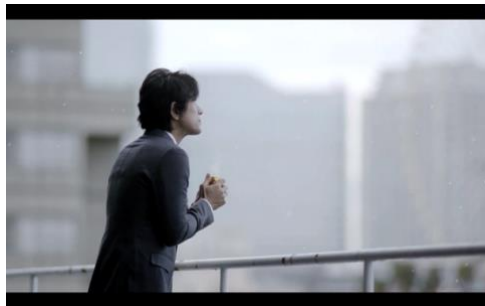
In the opening of the advertisement (Picture 1), the salaryman visits a dimly lit factory in a hurry where he approaches a worker and hands over some materials while asking for a task to be done. The factory worker responds with mild reluctance, asking, “Do I have to do it now?” The tone is casual but fatigued, showing that both men are tired and overworked. The salaryman bows slightly and apologizes. This scene showcases the nature of the salaryman’s status and work. He is most likely a middle-ranking employee in his company as he has some authority but is also tasked with jobs that anyone could do as we also see in the later scenes. The narration during the scenes of Picture 1 and 2 says that “*Everyone has their place. Everyone has their role.*” This is referencing to the gender roles in Japanese society. The salaryman’s place and role is at work and to provide, and the mother’s place is at home, taking care of the children and the home.

The scene in Picture 2 is a very typical and idealized image of Japanese family life. The father has already gone to work, the older child is just heading off to school, and the mother is on the floor getting the youngest ready for daycare. The setting is bright and warm, and the house is filled with toys, drawings, and children’s books, making it clear that children live in the house and are well taken care for. Even though the mother is tired and busy, she is not complaining or being snappy with the children.

This scene not only emphasizes that taking care of the home is a full-time job, but it also shows how clearly divided these roles are. The husband works outside, and the wife is in charge of everything inside including the kids, the house, and she even works part-time in a florist shop to support the family. The advertisement presents this as normal and even admirable. The wife is not portrayed as struggling or questioning this role. Instead, it is shown as her duty, just like the husband’s job is shown as his. This reflects how gender expectations are still strong and often visible in media.

The salaryman often works in supportive roles in these advertisements as can be seen from the scene of Picture 3. Pushing carts and collecting boxes in a warehouse is not usually something that is associated with a salaryman wearing a white shirt and a tie, but the character of these advertisements does it without complaints. He is eager to help in any way he can and thinks all work is important. This ties in with the narration: “*Everyone has their place. Everyone has their role.*” and the theme of the advertisement about all work having a purpose and the importance of work. The

masculinity of the salaryman in this advertisement is shown through his humility, hard work, compliance and dependability.



Picture 4. 00:25. The mother is back from her part-time job at the florist and is taking the laundry back inside, getting ready to cook dinner for the family.

Picture 5. 00:38. The salaryman is clutching his warm canned coffee on his break, while gazing longingly at the sky.

Picture 6. 00:47. The mother takes a brief break from cooking and gazes out of the window at the same time as her husband.

In the scene of Picture 4, the mother has returned home with the children and is taking the laundry back inside in a hurry before preparing dinner. Her day seems busy from the morning until the night, not having a moment to rest. This reinforces the idea of a good mother and wife working diligently in the background and taking care of the everyday life so that the husband can work long hours without having to worry about domestic labour.

In Picture 5, the salaryman finally has a moment to himself and is taking a break outside. He is clutching a warm canned coffee and looks up at the sky as snow starts falling. At the same time, his wife is also looking out to the sky (Picture 6). This symbolizes a connection between them and the importance of family. The narration of the latter part of the advertisement says *"To protect what's taken for granted. To protect what matters most. Everyone is living their own life."* For the salaryman, this means working hard and giving up his free time and precious moments with his wife and children, because he believes it is all for their sake. He does not do it because he wants to but because he believes that it is his role and responsibility as a father and as a man. The advertisement does not question or push against hegemonic gender roles or dominant ideas of masculinity in Japan. Instead, it treats them as

natural, even necessary, something that holds the family together and keeps daily life running smoothly.

5.2.2 Kirin Advertisement 2



Picture 7. 00:10. The salaryman is on his break, drinking a canned coffee as he watches a boy and a man throw a baseball.

Picture 8. 00:27. The salaryman is shifting through a warehouse, looking for a box.

In the scene of Picture 7, the salaryman is watching on as a boy is training his pitching skills as his father or a coach is encouraging him. The narration makes this scene impactful: *“I heard from your mother that you could not become a pitcher in your new team. But you know, right field has its own job, and only right field can do it.”*

From this brief excerpt of narration, the main theme of the advertisement can be found, and it links to the previous advertisement as well. Everyone has their place and role no matter if it is in a sports team, society or the workplace. It is also important to note that the father did not speak to his son directly but heard it from his wife, most likely because he is working such long hours that he is not often home. The relationship between masculinity, fatherhood and work is clear here as work is prioritized higher than family time. The idea of hegemonic salaryman masculinity is reinforced by the hard work and the distance and incapability to be home with this family. He watches as the boy and man pitch a baseball, but he cannot do it with his son because he is always working. He talks about his son with his wife, but not to his

son about important aspects of his life such as the new baseball team, because the work takes too much time. The advertisement is not depicting an image that the salaryman does not care about his family, but the opposite. He is working hard because of his family, which is a very normalized masculine trait.

Like in the previous advertisements and, as we will see, in the future advertisements, the salaryman is not afraid of doing physical work (Picture 8). Even if the work is not normally associated with white-collar workers, he has no complaints and completes the tasks, because it is what the team needs. In this advertisement, teamwork is valued higher than individual performance, as is traditionally the case in Japanese society as well.



Picture 9. 00:32. The salaryman carries boxes to a factory building.



Picture 10. 00:38. A factory worker hands the salaryman a canned coffee, thanking him for all the work he does.

The narration continues with the sentence *“That job was entrusted to you by the team.”* While in a literal sense, he is talking about baseball, it is also a metaphor for his role in the workplace. As he is delivering the boxes to a factory building in Picture 9, he is also doing a job that was entrusted to him by his team, even though it might not be the most glamorous one or one that he even wanted. He will do it nonetheless, because that is what it means to be a good employee. It shows how masculinity is tied to responsibility and duty, the idea that once something is handed to you, you are supposed to take it on without complaint.

The advertisement frames this as a meaningful moment by showing the gratitude of the factory worker. He casually hands him a canned coffee, saying, “Thanks for always helping out.” The salaryman looks slightly confused by this. He is likely not

used to being recognized for his work, so even a small gesture like this carries weight. The canned coffee becomes a symbolic reward and also ties the scene back to the opening, where he is seen drinking it during a break. Picture 10 also has an interesting dynamic between the two characters. One is a younger salaryman in a clean, well-kept suit and the other character is an older man in work clothes. Often in Japanese society age determines social hierarchy but here the employment status seem to be the most important indicator as the older man seems to be in a subordinate position to the salaryman. A man's identity and authority is often determined by his work status and not age. The salaryman represents the ideal: formally employed, stable, and aligned with mainstream expectations of what it means to be a successful man. In contrast, the older man has a blue-collar job and is represented in this advertisement as less powerful. This emphasizes the importance of employment and work to masculinity.

5.2.3 Kirin Advertisement 3



Picture 11. 00:08. The salaryman is sitting on a bench, drinking a canned coffee and watching children play football.



Picture 12. 00:18. The salaryman is working as an assistant in the meeting, changing the slides.

Following the example of the previous advertisements, the third one also focuses on the importance of work, drawing on sports metaphors. It is unclear if his own son is playing or not, but he narrates from a viewpoint of a father as if he is talking to his son: *“Dad does not hit home runs. He does not score the goals either. But every job needs someone to bunt, someone to make the pass. Dad takes pride in the work that does not get seen.”*

Like the previous advertisements, this one has similar themes of humility, responsibility, supporting others and masculinity. The narration draws a direct link between sports and work describing himself as a man who does not seek out glory and fame but does his job silently, supporting others but still feels proud of it. He uses sports terminology such as bunt and pass to describe the supportive work he does and distances himself from homeruns and goals which he enables others to do. In this advertisement masculinity is linked with getting the workplace to function as smoothly as possible with the cost of personal glory and the salaryman is happy to oblige.



Picture 13. 00:23. The salaryman is still working at the office even though it is almost 11pm.



Picture 14. 00:30. The salaryman is doing inventory in a warehouse.

The supportive work of the salaryman can be seen in the scenes of Pictures 12, 13 and 14. He is changing the slides for his superiors during a presentation, working at the background and not speaking himself. He lets others take the stage while enabling them to be able to give a good presentation by changing the slides when needed. After this scene, he is shown to be waving a taxi and looking on as they enter the car while he goes on to continue working in a dimly lit office (Picture 13). He is guiding his younger coworkers on how to do their job even though it is already late at night. He seems tired and it has been a long day for him as can be seen from his opened shirt buttons and a lack of tie that he had before. Nonetheless, he sacrifices his own free time and precious time with his family for work for which he does not get recognition, because that is what it means to be a salaryman. This is the invisible work that he feels proud of that he talks about in the narration: *“Dad does not hit home runs. He*

does not score the goals either. But every job needs someone to bunt, someone to make the pass. Dad takes pride in the work that does not get seen.”

The setting in Picture 13 is also important and gives a picture of the corporate working culture in Japan. The man on the left is most likely a senior employee, ranked above the other two. While he is staying at the office, there is pressure to stay for the younger employees as well and not all personal sacrifices to the company are made because of their own free will. The main salaryman of the advertisement is situated between these two people, the senior employee on his right and the junior employee that he is guiding is on his left.

Following the same pattern, in the scene of Picture 14 he is doing an inventory in the warehouse, because there seemed to be a problem with a shipment. Like his coworkers rely on him to support them and teach them, he is also relied on to solve problems such as this one. As a man, he steps in when something goes wrong, and he does not complain nor does he need praise or attention for doing his job. He is a man who is responsible and trustworthy, while being humble and hardworking. All these traits reinforce the status of his hegemonic salaryman masculinity.

5.2.4 Kirin Advertisement 4



Picture 15. 00:03. The salaryman goes to work by train in a suit amongst other salarymen.



Picture 16. 00:06. The salaryman gets off the train and walks to work from the station in a good mood.

The scene in Picture 15 represents a very typical commute for a salaryman. He is traveling to work in the morning in a packed train filled with other commuters. The suit they are all wearing is a very noticeable feature about them and the uniformity of the salarymen in the train can be seen as a symbol of conformity, discipline, and

masculine professionalism. The main character of the advertisement looks tired and sleepy on his commute but as he gets off the train, he seems to be full of energy and greets a worker with a smile on his face (Picture 16.).

This shift in his behaviour highlights an important aspect of masculinity in the context of Japanese work culture: emotional regulation and outward composure, especially in public spaces. Even if the salaryman feels exhausted, he still puts on a face and happily greets the blue-collar worker on his way. This brief exchange between them is a part of the recurring message in these advertisements. Work in itself is important. Everyone has a role and a part to play in the workforce. The burst of energy he seems to get when walking to work is a good example of performative masculinity. He is not pretending or being fake but rather doing what is expected of him. He is acting like a dependable and hardworking salaryman. In a society where being a man means enduring, providing, and working hard, this kind of switch feels like a way to show strength and responsibility, even if he does not actually feel that way inside.



Picture 17. 00:15. The salaryman switches to his work clothes, from a suit to a construction site supervisor's outfit.



Picture 18. 00:16. The salaryman's father bows down deep as a car drives off.

As can be seen from the scene of Picture 17, the salaryman's role in this advertisement is a construction site supervisor. He takes responsibility for safety, coordination, and oversight on the site, managing multiple workers and inspecting their work. This is a step away from the corporate world that the other advertisements showed, but the man has no complaints and seems to be proud of his work, reflecting the same themes of teamwork and invisible work from the other advertisements.

It also changes to visual look of the main character as he does not have his black suit anymore and makes him look more like a blue-collar worker albeit in a managerial role. This makes him blend into the environment of physical labour while not actually doing any physical labour as he is only instructing and inspecting the work of others.

The change from salaryman attire to worker's outfit suggests that true leadership does not always stand out or sit at the top of the hierarchy but can often be found on the field. The advertisement continues to build on the image of the ideal salaryman as someone who does not seek recognition but earns respect through hard work and dependability.

Fatherhood, work and masculinity are important themes in this advertisement as the narration showcases: *"I hated my dad, working in dirty clothes. I hated how he bowed his head to everyone. I hated how he kept smiling through it all. Now I am about the age he was back then. The job that once seemed so small, I understand it now."*

The narration shows the world view of the salaryman and his growth from a child to an adult. His idea of masculinity and work has changed during this time. As a child, he rejected the kind of masculinity his father represented as he worked in dirty clothes, was in a subordinate position to everyone and did invisible work (Picture 18). The main character would have been growing up during the economic boom of Japan when salaryman masculinity became hegemonic and became the norm, so when his father did not fit into that mold, he did not approve that.

The line "The job that once seemed so small, I understand it now" is important. It shows that being a man is not about doing something loud or impressive. It is about showing up and doing the work, even if no one notices. As the salaryman is now about the same age as his father was back then, he understands the importance of

work. The advertisement suggests that this kind of pride and masculinity is passed down not by talking about it, but by showing it through everyday actions.

This ties into the larger theme of the advertisements. The ideal type of masculinity is not about standing out, it is about being there and doing what needs to be done, whether it is for the family, the team, or the company.



Picture 19. 00:50. The salaryman's father getting up after a break and returning to work.

Picture 20. 00:52. At the same time, the salaryman also stands up to continue working.

The final scenes in Pictures 19 and 20 tie the advertisement together by showing both the father and the son taking a break and getting up to continue working at the same time. This is to say that the son now understands his father and they are on the same wavelength, also symbolising a generational continuity in working. Work is a major theme as the father and son connect through it. Even though the son looked down on his father's work before, it has now become a model for him.

The themes in the advertisement are similar to those of the previous advertisements. Hard work, humility, commitment and endurance are again at the centre. These are not just shown as good character traits but as essential parts of what makes a man respectable and valuable. The men of the advertisement do not seek recognition for their efforts but take quiet pride in doing what is expected of them. This idea connects directly to hegemonic masculinity, where the ideal man is someone who provides, sacrifices, and endures without complaint.

6 Discussion

The main objective of this thesis was to analyse the portrayals of masculinity and fatherhood in relation to employment status in Japanese media. The analysis focused on two distinct representations: the figure of the salaryman in a corporate advertisement and the character of Osamu in the fictional film *Shoplifters*. By examining how these characters embody or resist hegemonic ideals of masculinity, this thesis explored how fatherhood, work, and emotional expression intersect with broader societal expectations in contemporary Japan. The main findings will now be summarized to address the first research question:

1. How do Japanese media representations contrast salaryman masculinity with non-regular employment masculinity?

6.1 *Shoplifters*

The story of *Shoplifters* explores a family living on the outskirts of society, struggling to make ends meet and resort to shoplifting to put food on the table. This is by no means an unrealistic setting as one out of six Japanese are living in poverty, and irregular workers make up one third of all the workers (Allison, 2013). *Shoplifters* uses its domestic setting to highlight and critique deeper issues in Japanese society, particularly poverty and family structures, but also provides a good chance to study how masculinity is portrayed in the film. The main character of the film, Osamu, who plays the role of the father in the film is a step away from the hegemonic salaryman masculinity as he does not have steady employment, stable income or not even his own home. Osamu navigates his sense of masculinity through emotional presence, care and mentorship for his children rather than through employment and providing as is conventionally the case for salarymen (Allison, 1994).

Osamu's nurturing role aligns with what Roberson and Suzuki (2003) terms 'caregiving masculinities'—a subordinated but growing model in Japan. Despite his marginal status, Osamu finds other ways to assert his masculinity. Rather than embodying the stoic, financially secure salaryman ideal, he takes on a nurturing, emotionally available role within the family. His bond with Shota in particular reflects his alternative masculinity. Through moments like the discussion about puberty, familial labels when Yuri joins the family or teaching Shota how to steal,

Osamu positions himself as a mentor and father figure, which are roles that are typically reserved for men who have stable employment. These actions allow him to reclaim a sense of masculine identity not through material provision, but through emotional closeness, guidance and care.

Hidaka's (2010) interviews confirm that men in irregular work (freeters) are socially perceived as 'failures as men', a stigma Osamu embodies through his exclusion from legal fatherhood, steady employment and stable housing. The Kirin salaryman's social prestige mirrors Hidaka's (2010) findings that Japanese men still view corporate employment as the only 'fully-fledged' masculinity. This makes Osamu's position especially nonnormative: as a non-regular worker engaged in emotional labour, he fails both as a provider (by Hidaka's respondents' standards) and as a caregiver (by salaryman norms that outsource parenting to women).

Despite Osamu creating his own version of masculinity, he still struggles with the conventional ideas of manhood and providing for the family as can be seen from his undermining of the grandmother's pension by emphasizing that the pension money is not hers, showing a need to assert his role as a caretaker (Picture 7 in the Analysis section). Similarly, he yearns for a life where he could be accepted as Shota's father, and to be able to live with him in a home of his own as can be seen from the scene where he walks into the unfinished apartment and the scene where he plays with the football (Pictures 4 and 5 in the Analysis section).

6.2 Kirin Advertisements

Having examined Osamu's irregular employment masculinity in *Shoplifters*, we now turn to its hegemonic counterpart: the Kirin salaryman, whose portrayal reinforces conventional norms the film critiques. Hegemonic masculinity means the dominant form of masculinity in a society that subordinates other masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The Kirin canned coffee advertisements showcase a salaryman whose masculinity is very much in line with the hegemonic salaryman masculinity in Japan. Across the four analysed advertisements, the protagonist embodies hegemonic ideals where a man's worth is tied to his role as a reliable, invisible force within the corporate machine. Unlike *Shoplifters*' Osamu, whose masculinity is constructed outside of formal employment, the Kirin salaryman derives identity entirely from his labour, even when it goes unrecognized.

The advertisements collectively promote several key ideological messages about work and masculinity in Japanese society: all work has a purpose and all work is important, even if it is mundane or unrecognized. The salaryman in the advertisements is depicted to work as hard as he does for his family as can be deduced from the narration of the first advertisement: *"To protect what's taken for granted. To protect what matters most. Everyone is living their own life."* By devoting his life for his company and work, he is providing for his family, giving them economic stability. There is a sense of irony here as his long hours at the office that are framed as acts of love and protection, come at the cost of him being unable to spend time with his family. He is physically and emotionally distant from his family.

The Kirin advertisements embody the hegemonic salaryman ideal, a cultural archetype that emerged during Japan's post-war economic boom. By the 1980s, when Japan had solidified its position as a global economic power, the salaryman became synonymous with corporate success and national identity (Dasgupta, 2013). This aligns with the advertisements' portrayal of sacrifice as virtuous and committing one's life to the company as masculine, as work is closely tied to masculinity in the Japanese context (Dasgupta, 2013). The salaryman embodies hegemonic masculinity, representing ideals such as corporate loyalty, providing for the family, personal sacrifice and emotional stoicism (Allison, 1994).

In the end, the Kirin advertisements present a clear but narrow vision of masculinity, one where a man's value comes mainly from his work. The sacrifices of the salaryman are portrayed as noble, but they come at a cost: his absence from family life and his own free time. While these advertisements celebrate the dignity of hard work, they also reinforce traditional expectations that tie masculinity to silent endurance in the workplace. This is especially contrasting to Shoplifters' presentation of alternative models of masculinity rooted in care and emotional connection, the Kirin commercials reinforce the notion that for the salaryman, professional duty and dedication to work are central to masculine identity, fitting into the mold of hegemonic salaryman masculinity.

This analysis reveals how the film and the advertisements present two competing visions of masculinity. The Kirin advertisements link a man's worth to his corporate role, dependability and self-sacrifice, while Shoplifters offers an alternative model where masculinity is defined by caregiving and emotional presence rather than

employment. These opposing portrayals highlight the tension between Japan's hegemonic masculine ideals and evolving notions of what it means to be a man.

6.3 Comparison

This section builds on the previous comparison of salaryman and non-regular employment masculinities in *Shoplifters* and the Kirin advertisements to examine what these different portrayals suggest about contemporary Japanese gender norms. The analysis compares both media texts through three main themes: work and masculine identity, family dynamics, and societal expectations. Through this comparison, we can observe how traditional salaryman masculinity remains dominant in some media representations, while other portrayals present different approaches to masculine identity. These differences highlight ongoing discussions in Japanese society about masculinity during a time of economic and social change. This section aims to answer the second research question:

2. What do these contrasting portrayals reveal about tensions between hegemonic and emergent masculinities in contemporary Japanese society?

6.3.1 Work and Masculine Identity

The relationship between employment and masculine identity serves as a foundational theme in both *Shoplifters* and the Kirin advertisements, revealing competing visions of what it means to be a man in contemporary Japan. These portrayals reflect broader societal tensions surrounding work, economic stability, and masculine self-worth.

The Kirin advertisements present a clear connection between masculinity and corporate employment, reinforcing the hegemonic salaryman model that dominated Japan's post-war economic growth (Dasgupta, 2013). The protagonist's identity is entirely defined by his role as a dependable, self-sacrificing employee, as seen in scenes where he works late into the night (Pictures 12-13) and prioritizes company duties over family life.

However, this portrayal carries an implicit tension. While the salaryman's dedication is celebrated, his physical and emotional absence from home life highlights the costs of this model. As Genda (2007) demonstrates in his analysis of Japan's "lost

generation," the collapse of the bubble economy and subsequent "employment ice age" fundamentally altered youth perceptions of work.

As Brinton (2011) notes, Japan's prolonged economic stagnation has significantly reshaped the labor market, making stable, lifelong corporate employment increasingly difficult to attain. Despite these structural changes, media representations such as the Kirin advertisements continue to uphold the salaryman as the ideal model of masculinity. This enduring cultural ideal reflects what Hidaka (2010) describes as the deep-rooted social attachment to the salaryman identity, which persists even as the reality of securing such employment becomes less attainable.

This tension between economic conditions and cultural ideals becomes especially visible when comparing these two media portrayals. The Kirin commercials depict a world where corporate loyalty and personal sacrifice continue to define masculine identity, reflecting the persistence of hegemonic ideals that Hidaka (2010) outlines. In contrast, *Shoplifters* presents Osamu as a clear counterpoint as his status as an irregular worker embodies the economic insecurity Brinton (2011) identifies, where stable employment is no longer guaranteed. Yet Osamu's circumstances also underscore the enduring influence of the salaryman model: despite developing an alternative masculinity rooted in caregiving and emotional presence, he is still shaped by a social environment that primarily values men for their economic role, as Hidaka (2010) writes.

6.3.2 Family Dynamics

The depiction of family roles and domestic responsibilities provides another key contrast between the two models of masculinity. In the Kirin advertisements, there is a clear boundary between work and home as the salaryman's duty lies in the workplace, and his family remains emotionally and physically distant. Masculinity is affirmed through professional sacrifice rather than direct engagement with the household. *Shoplifters*, by contrast, blurs this division. Osamu's identity as a father emerges not from economic provision but from active participation in everyday family life. The home becomes the site where his masculinity is expressed through emotional closeness, caregiving, and shared experience, challenging the conventional separation between breadwinning and nurturing.

While the Kirin advertisements frame fatherhood as implicit and indirect, something achieved through work rather than emotional involvement, Shoplifters presents a much more intimate and emotionally present version of fatherhood. Osamu's daily presence in the lives of the children, particularly in his mentoring of Shota and Yuri, demonstrates a form of masculinity rooted in caregiving. This contrasts sharply with the salaryman model, where the father's love is symbolized by financial stability and professional endurance rather than emotional expression.

This distinction reflects a broader shift in Japanese society that scholars such as Ishii-Kuntz (2017) have identified. Although traditional norms continue to cast fathers primarily as breadwinners, there has been a gradual rise in men actively participating in childcare. One visible expression of this trend is the emergence of the *ikumēn*, a term coined in the 2010s to refer to men who take an active role in parenting and promote hands-on fatherhood as both modern and desirable. While government initiatives have supported the *ikumēn* model as part of broader work-life balance reforms, it still operates within narrow cultural boundaries: men are encouraged to engage in childcare, but without threatening the broader breadwinner ideal (Ishii-Kuntz, 2003).

These developments point to broader tensions in Japan's gender order, where emergent masculinities coexist with but rarely displace the hegemonic salaryman ideal. Alongside caregiving fathers and *ikumēn*, media and academic discourse have noted the rise of so-called "herbivore men" (*sōshoku danshi*), younger men who reject conventional masculine norms such as aggressive career ambition, marriage, or assertiveness (Charlebois, 2013; Dasgupta, 2013). Originally, however, the term referred to men who placed little emphasis on sexual or romantic pursuits with women (Morioka, 2011). This disinterest in romantic pursuit appears to reflect a broader generational realignment of masculine values in Japan, one that simultaneously reconfigures attitudes toward work, ambition, and fatherhood. While often pathologized in popular media as passive or emasculated, these men reflect a generational shift away from the rigid expectations symbolized by the salaryman figure. However, as Dasgupta (2013) and Roberson and Suzuki (2003) argue, these alternative masculinities, whether caregiving fathers, irregular workers like Osamu, or herbivore men, continue to be framed against the backdrop of hegemonic masculinity, which remains institutionally and culturally privileged.

6.3.3 Societal Expectations

The competing portrayals of masculinity in *Shoplifters* and the Kirin advertisements reveal how deeply societal expectations shape male identity in Japan. Both pieces of media engage with the tension between conventional ideals and contemporary realities, but they do so in different ways: one reinforcing hegemonic norms, the other resisting them.

The Kirin advertisements reinforce societal expectations by portraying the salaryman as the ideal man: hardworking, self-sacrificing, and emotionally restrained. The film *Shoplifters* challenges these norms through Osamu, a man who has been excluded from this ideal. Osamu's irregular employment places him on the edges of social legitimacy, reflecting Hidaka's (2010) findings that men outside the corporate system are often seen inferior to men with steady employment. However, rather than framing Osamu as lacking, *Shoplifters* presents his alternative masculinity as meaningful and emotionally fulfilling. His care, physical presence, and emotional availability offer an alternative to the hegemonic salaryman form of masculinity. Still, the film also shows how difficult it is to fully escape the influence of hegemonic expectations, as Osamu still seeks recognition through conventional roles like fatherhood and providing.

In contrast, the Kirin commercials maintain a clear vision of what masculinity should look like in the eyes of society. The salaryman's emotional and physical absence from home is presented as a necessary and even honourable trade-off for his loyalty to the company. While the emotional cost of this model is hinted at, the narrative ultimately upholds the idea that true masculinity is found in perseverance, responsibility, and corporate dedication. This portrayal aligns with Dasgupta's (2013) argument that the salaryman remains a hegemonic masculine ideal in Japanese society, upheld in media as the benchmark of adult male identity. The contrast between the film and the advertisements reveals how Japanese media reflects an ongoing tension: while real-life conditions demand more diverse masculinities, normative ideals continue to dominate mainstream representation.

6.4 Conclusions

This thesis has explored different representations of masculinity in Japanese media by analysing the film *Shoplifters* and the Kirin canned coffee advertisements. These texts reflect broader social tensions around work, family, and identity. The analysis shows that while the Kirin ads support the traditional salaryman image as the ideal, *Shoplifters* challenges this by presenting a different kind of masculinity based on caregiving and emotional presence. Together, these portrayals highlight Japan's ongoing struggle to balance old expectations with changing realities, especially as stable employment becomes harder to find and gender roles continue to shift.

The findings show that media can both reflect and shape cultural values. The Kirin advertisements present the salaryman as a hardworking and self-sacrificing figure, while *Shoplifters* brings attention to men who do not fit this ideal but still form meaningful masculine identities. This contrast reflects larger issues in Japanese society, such as the pressure to succeed at work, the challenges of fatherhood, and the emotional costs faced by men who fall outside traditional paths.

While this study focused on two main examples, future research could look at other types of media, such as news, manga, or online communities, to see how masculinity is shown in different ways. It could also explore how ideas about masculinity vary between different age groups or parts of Japan.

In the end, this thesis highlights how media can both support and question social norms. The difference between *Shoplifters* and the Kirin advertisements shows a society where traditional ideas about masculinity still hold power, even as new forms of manhood are beginning to appear. By looking at these different portrayals, we can better understand the changes happening in Japanese masculinity today.

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