Representation of Female *Hāfuness* through Life Experiences: A Case Study of Female *Hāfu* YouTubers' Digital Storytelling

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Abstract: This article examines videos created by female YouTubers who identified themselves as *hāfu*. Using online ethnography, the objective is to examine how they construct alternative meanings of female *hāfuness* through three themes of digital storytelling: physical appearance, language proficiency, and cultural identity. The results suggest that YouTube enables these YouTubers to participate in digital storytelling of life experiences in ways that redefine the stereotypical and limited role of physical appearance, language, and cultural identity that have influenced female *hāfu* representation and dominated Japanese mainstream media for more than fifty years.

Keywords: *female hāfu YouTubers, self-representation, digital storytelling, life experiences*

1. Introduction

(1) Defining "*Hāfu*" and the "*Hāfuness*"

In Japan, the term *hāfu* is used to describe individuals of mixed heritage, particularly those with one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent. According to Okamura (2017, 43), the Japanese language has incorporated the term *hāfu*, which originates from the English words "half-caste" and "half-blood," to represent individuals with racially mixed backgrounds. Moreover, existing literature suggests that for over fifty years, Japanese mainstream media has fixated on stereotypical ways of representing female *hāfu* (Kawai 2014; Iwabuchi 2014; Kean 2021; Shimoji 2018, 2021). This phenomenon can be traced back to the *hāfu tarento*[1] boom in the Japanese media industry during the 1970s, when a group of female *hāfu tarento*[2] of mixed Euro-American and Japanese heritage became cultural icons (Kawai 2014; Shimoji 2018, 158), celebrated and commodified for their perceived exotic images. As Kawai explains:

> The *hāfu* featured in the Japanese entertainment industry, both historically and in contemporary contexts, have predominantly been of white European descent. These individuals are typically referred to as hāfu rather than mixed blood. The (Japanese) media

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1 "タレント" (*Tarento*) in Japanese refers to a "TV personality" or "celebrity," often someone who appears regularly on various television shows.

2 For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Shimoji (2018, 158), which includes examples such as "The Golden *Hāfu*," a group that epitomized the cultural fascination with *hāfu* representation in the 1970s.

> has commodified their bodies, often depicting them as being "beautiful" and "aspirational." (Kawai 2014, 43)

In this context, scholars indicate that the representation of female *hāfu* in Japanese mainstream media has significantly shaped societal views of *hāfu* individuals, promoting exclusionary ideologies that privilege a limited and rigid notion of *hāfuness*. This concept, as applied in this study, refers to a set of mixed-race images shaped by the media representations of women with mixed Japanese and non-Japanese heritage. As Iwabuchi contends:

> …a stereotypical categorization of mixed-ness that attests to the Euro-American-dominated globalism… excludes and marginalizes those who do not match the images and does not represent that mixed-ness related to other Asian origins and heritages who show no discernible difference in bodily features. (Iwabuchi 2014, 623)

Furthermore, the existing body of literature acknowledges that representations of *hāfu* in mainstream Japanese media collectively perpetuate the racialized and gendered constructions of *hāfuness*. Various media platforms reflect these discussions, including Japanese sports news (Ogasawara 2020; Yamamoto 2014, 68; Shimoji 2020, 80), Japanese films (Ko 2014), hip-hop music (Doerra and Kumagai 2012), Japanese *shōjo* manga (Tanaka 2014), and Japanese TV commercials (Zhang 2024). They have identified that the construction of *hāfu*-ness in Japanese mainstream media takes two dichotomous trajectories.

On the one hand, the construction of female *hāfuness* underscores Japanese society's racialized preference for physical traits that are associated with Euro-American heritage (Kean 2021, 32). This aligns with broader Japanese discourses of *hakujinsei* (whiteness), *seiyōsei* (Westernness), and *ōbeika* (Euro-Americanization), which reinforce the dominance of Western cultural ideals and perpetuate white privilege within Japanese society (Shimoji 2021, 104). On the other hand, in Japanese sports, scholars have observed that hāfu athletes, particularly those of Black African mixed-race heritage, are often portrayed through masculinized stereotypes that emphasize physical strength, athleticism, and aggression (Yamamoto 2014; Ogasawara 2020; Shimoji 2020).

However, in an era where people's media consumption habits have shifted from traditional platforms to online media (Bennett 2008; Hanna et al. 2011; Bhavsar 2018), Shimoji (2018) suggests that the meaning of the term "*hāfu*" has undergone a significant transformation, driven by *hāfu* individuals who actively share their personal experiences on social media to challenge stereotypes and foster a more diverse understanding of *hāfu* identities:

> The growing presence of *hāfu* individuals on social media has allowed them to share critiques of their daily experiences of social exclusion. This challenges the unequal structures of Japanese society and questions exclusionary ideologies of racialization, discrimination, and othering. (Shimoji 2018, 246)

This provides an important hint for us to reconsider how we can move the discussion of female *hāfu*-ness from its traditional context within Japanese popular media to the realm of online platforms such as YouTube. While the selective portrayal of female *hāfuness* as "the Japanese Other" in Japan's traditional mainstream media has been widely discussed in existing literature (Kawai 2014; Iwabuchi 2014; Kean 2021; Shimoji 2018, 2021), there is a gap in research examining how *hāfu* women, as YouTubers, actively engage in self-representation to address issues of gender and race in their content (Thumim 2012; Dobson 2015; Day 2017) and reclaim their own understanding

of what it means to be female *hāfu*. Thus, this article examines videos created by female YouTubers who identify as *hāfu*, with the objective of examining how they construct alternative meanings for female *hāfuness* through different themes of digital storytelling. It evaluates how their self-representation, rooted in their life experiences, has the potential to challenge societal discourses and scholarly interpretations of female *hāfuness* as constructed by the female *hāfu* representation as discussed in Japanese mainstream media. This study is guided by the following questions:

How can we evaluate the meaning of female *hāfuness* through the online storytelling of female *hāfu* YouTubers, specifically in relation to their life experiences concerning their physical appearance, language proficiency, and cultural identity? Additionally, to what extent do these representations provide alternative understandings to the representation of female *hāfu* found in Japanese mainstream media?

I argue that the idea of "female *hāfuness*," as represented by female *hāfu* YouTubers, can be understood through three alternative perspectives: as a resource for reproducing personal experiences that shape the online storytelling of female *hāfu* individuals, as a vehicle for parasocial interactions that allow female *hāfu* YouTubers to connect with diverse audiences and foster supportive online communities; and as a tool for resisting the stereotypical form of female *hāfu* representations in Japanese mainstream media.

2. Literature Review

(1) Examining YouTuber's Self-Representation and Digital Storytelling

YouTube represents one of the most popular media platforms for video-sharing, attracts over 2 billion logged-in monthly users and hosts more than 500 hours of video content uploaded every minute (Dixon 2024). On YouTube, the notion of "self" plays a fundamental role in shaping user's engagement with the platforms. This aligns with what Jenkins (2006) has termed "participatory culture," which highlights the active involvement of ordinary users in creating and circulating media content from bottom-up perspectives.

According to Cocker and Cronin (2017, 461), a YouTuber is a content creator who "galvanizes interest among consumer audiences largely due to the participatory meaning-making and sense-making around the personal qualities they (choose to) convey through their videos." A key framework for understanding YouTubers is the concept of self-representation, which, according to Rettberg (2014), refers to how individuals construct their identities through various mediums of written, visual, or quantitative texts, emphasizing the importance of seeing an individual's representation of themselves as communications of symbolic texts (Enli and Thumim 2012, 90; Rettberg 2014, 8).

In *Self-representation and Digital Culture*, Thumim (2012) argues that online self-representation differs from traditional media representations because it involves the mediation of textual production, institutional circulation, and cultural reception. She suggests that self-representation is distinct in its role as a political and democratic tool for individual expression, stating:

> The concept and discourse of self-representation contains a valorization of experience which has a democratic function and at the same time invokes the possibility of material political outcomes. (Thumim 2012, 9)

Moreover, Lewis (2018, 16) points out that YouTube allows people to represent themselves in

a way that challenges the rigid, hierarchical identities often promoted by traditional media. In this context, as Vivienne (2016, 11) posits, self-representation is a powerful form of digital storytelling wherein individuals, rather than being strategic or organized, utilize their personal narratives in everyday contexts to contest social norms. Previous research has employed this framework to examine how female YouTubers, as digital storytellers, use the platform to convey personal narratives that reflect their gender identities and challenge societal norms. These narratives address issues such as racial justice (Gaunt 2015; Matias and Grosland 2016; Sobande 2017; McCullough et al. 2020; Im 2022), gender identity (Szostak 2014; Lange 2014; Dobsen 2015; Pérez-Torres et al. 2018; Caldeira et al. 2020), and the ways they address the interplay of these two issues (Georges 2009; Harrington 2019; Michikyan et al. 2015; Day 2017; Jones 2019; Watt et al. 2019).

(2) Examining Challenges in Digital Storytelling Practices

While digital storytelling allows YouTubers to actively represent their own identities and shape public discourses, current research suggests that it is limited by the anonymous algorithmic nature of digital platforms (Nakamura 2002, 2009). These limitations, in turn, present challenges in reinforcing online misrepresentations of racial and gender identities. For instance, Salter (2013) highlights that the anonymity of internet-based communication often leads to less regulated content creation. This lack of regulation exemplifies what Nakamura (2002, 17) terms the "cybertype," a framework that utilizes digital interfaces to mediate and reconfigure racial and gendered identities based on avatars, links, and website menus. Furthermore, Nakamura (2009, 128) argues that the lack of user accountability has rendered race an unidentifiable category, as it "has no basis in a person's actual race." In other words, these constructed digital or online identities are not necessarily tied to creators' real-world experiences.

In addition to the issue of accountability, previous studies indicate that the pressures of personal branding and monetization on YouTube often compel YouTubers to alter their true identities, resulting in the creation of quasi-authentic representations for commercial purposes (Chen 2013; Tarnovskaya 2017; Cunningham and Craig 2017). This process perpetuates inauthenticity and exacerbates existing misrepresentations of race and gender in the context of representations seen in female YouTubers' videos (Oh and Oh 2017; Little 2020; Banet-Weiser 2021; Mavrakis 2021). These tensions align with what Vivienne (2016, 46) describes as the dualism between "nature" and "nurture." Simply put, although YouTube has attained a significant degree of equality by enabling users to broadcast themselves through digital storytelling, this does not guarantee unbiased representation of those identities inside the platform's narratives.

Scholarly discussions on female YouTubers' practice of self-representation and digital storytelling have highlighted the emergence of diverse and autonomous "bottom-up" forms of female identity representation, which contrast with the top-down, hegemonic strategies of traditional media that maintain centralized control over these portrayals (Jenkins 2006, 18). Nevertheless, there has been relatively little examination of female *hāfu* YouTubers in this context. Specifically, how YouTube enables *hāfu* women to use digital storytelling to represent themselves by sharing their life experiences — particularly regarding the gender and racial inequalities they face as *hāfu* living in Japan, and the extent to which these self-representations offer alternative perspectives to the portrayals of *hāfu* women in Japanese mainstream media (e.g., Iwabuchi 2014; Kawai 2014; Shimoji 2018, 2021) remains to be elaborated.

3. Research Methods

To investigate how female *hāfu* YouTubers construct alternative representations for female *hāfuness*, I employ online ethnography — a qualitative research method that "combines archival and online communications work, participation and observation, with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis, and research representation" (Kozinets 2010, 2). This approach allows an in-depth examination of how female *hāfu* YouTubers employ monologues, conversations, and visual strategies as components of their digital storytelling to represent their female *hāfuness* in ways that differ from the female *hāfu* representations analyzed by scholars within the context of Japanese mainstream media (Kawai 2014; Iwabuchi 2014; Kean 2021; Shimoji 2018, 2021).

The research process involved observing YouTube videos using four Japanese search tags, including "*hāfu*," "foreign *hāfu*," "Japanese *hāfu*," and "female *hāfu*." These terms are commonly used within the YouTube community to focus on individuals of mixed race in Japan. The observed videos covered topics including makeup tutorials, food explorations, travel vlogs, and family moments. The content was presented in various formats, such as monologues, face-to-face discussions with other female *hāfu* YouTubers, and Q&A sessions with viewers.

While this study builds on existing literature that examines how media portrays female *hāfu* as symbols of Euro-Americanized identity, frequently emphasizing attributes such as white physical appearance or English proficiency, it is not the intent of this article to focus exclusively on female *hāfu* YouTubers with Euro-American mixed-raced backgrounds and only addresses how they challenge existing scholarly discourse (Kawai 2014; Iwabuchi 2014; Kean 2021; Shimoji 2018, 2021) through a comparative lens. As defined at the beginning of this article, media representations of women with mixed Japanese and non-Japanese heritage shape the concept of "female *hāfuness*." Thus, in the context of this study on female YouTubers, the analysis includes *hāfu* YouTubers with diverse mixed racial backgrounds. The aim is to support my argument that their "female *hāfuness*" collectively serves as an alternative to the dominant *hāfu* representations in Japanese mainstream media. This alternative incorporates underrepresented voices, highlighting a diverse range of life experiences among female *hāfu* from various mixed-race backgrounds, and it has the potential to challenge those that frequently associate female *hāfu* identity with Euro-American racial or cultural characteristics.

The following sections will present analysis findings on how female *hāfu* YouTubers use digital storytelling to address three major themes. The first theme, "physical appearances," encompasses videos that explore societal stereotypes related to the physical appearance of *hāfu* women, often rooted in the assumption that they possess non-Japanese looks characterized by perceived Western features. The second theme, "language proficiency," examines how female *hāfu* YouTubers' digital storytelling engages with language-related cultural expectations, highlighting the societal stereotypes that position female *hāfu* as English speakers or bilinguals proficient in both Japanese and non-Japanese languages. The third theme, "cultural identity," analyzes how *hāfu* YouTubers represent their female *hāfuness* in relation to their nationality and cultural affiliation, exploring the tensions created by societal expectations and stereotypes surrounding their Japanese and non-Japanese heritages. The analysis was conducted using transcriptions of spoken contents created with the transcription tool Notta,[3] and included screenshots of visual elements from the analyzed videos.

3 Notta is an AI-powered tool that transforms speech from videos into written text.

4. Findings

(1) Representation of Physical Appearances

First, this article suggests that physical appearance serves as a central theme in the digital storytelling of female *hāfu* YouTubers. Although existing literature has made critiques on mainstream Japanese media for portraying the physical attributes of female *hāfu* as epitomes of idealized whiteness and Westernness (Iwabuchi 2014; Kawai 2014; Shimoji 2018, 2021), female *hāfu* YouTubers actively utilize physical appearance as a means to address the challenges of living as female *hāfu* in Japan. Hence, I argue that this approach of digital storytelling allows female *hāfu* YouTubers to reclaim their "*hāfuness*" by providing more nuanced and empowering viewpoints that reflect their lived experiences, in opposition to prevailing media narratives that seek to marginalize or stereotype them.

For instance, Alicia, a Ghanaian-Japanese *hāfu*, describes her struggle with hair volume in her video:

> I feel like all the other Japanese kids are born with straight and silky hair, and I've been envious of that for 15 years. So, I decided to try to get rid of my heavy hair volume because I dislike having too much volume. Every morning, I braided my hair to get that 'zero volume' look, you know? (Arichieru Channeru [Alichel Channel] 2020, 2:47).

Alicia's narrative on her hair volume management illustrates the challenges Black *hāfu* women encounter in a Japanese society that frequently marginalizes them due to their characteristics. Her storytelling implicitly challenges the restrictive societal norms that compel Black *hāfu* women to hide their inherent physical characteristics to align with the dominant societal beauty discourses on Japanese women's skin lightness and whiteness (Ashikari 2005). Her declaration, "I'm a Black *hāfu*," and her sharing of the decision to bleach her hair "on behalf of all the Black African population" send powerful messages of self-reclamation to her viewers. Through opening up about her personal struggles, she challenges the prevailing notion that ideal female *hāfuness* must conform to specific physical traits, where the physical traits of Black female *hāfu* are often erased.

Moreover, the representation of physical appearance enables Black female *hāfu* YouTubers to interact with their viewers while engaging in self-evaluation, a process of incorporating "individuals' attributes for social comparison" (Higgins et al. 1986, 27). In another video, Alicia, alongside YouTuber Chelsea, a Nigerian *hāfu*, responds to a viewer's question about whether they are considered desirable in romantic relationships and whether Japanese men would view Black *hāfu* women as potential partners:

> I've heard that people find petite, fair-skinned, silky-haired girls with tanuki-like faces, specifically those who look like Arimura Kasumi, to be attractive. Well, none of that really applies, right? Especially in the case of being Black hāfu women. Generally, it doesn't fit our looks. You know, we're not even part of that imagination, are we? When someone thinks about wanting to be in a romantic relationship, it's unlikely that they would specifically choose a Black hāfu women and fantasize about being in a relationship with a Black hāfu women in Japan. But isn't it ultimately like that? If you really think about it, you'll realize, right? I mean, there are people with African backgrounds who have partners, and there are those who don't. The same goes for people who are obese. Some of them have partners, and some don't… (Arichieru Channeru [Alichel Channel] 2023, 4:29)

Given the criteria of body size, skin tone, hair texture, and facial characteristics, the above quote points out how Black *hāfu* themselves engage in the form of social comparison to address dominant cultural perceptions that fail to include Black *hāfu* women in their concept of Japanese female attractiveness. By representing their physical appearances, they highlight the incompatibility between the mainstream media's construction of the ideal Japanese woman and the marginalized position of Black *hāfu* women within that framework. By voicing this challenging reality, Black female *hāfu* YouTubers like Chelsea reconfigure the framework of female *hāfu* representation, questioning the restrictive ideals embedded in the visual language of Japanese beauty standards, which value women's light skin (Ashikari 2005), slimness (Takimoto et al. 2004), and *yasashii* (gentle) features (Ho 2014), thereby marginalizing those who do not conform to these ideals. Through her storytelling, Chelsea invites a rethinking of how her self-representation can offer an alternative narrative to female *hāfuness* as constructed in mainstream Japanese media — one that empowers *hāfu* individuals to reclaim space and confront the exclusionary societal narratives that define *what it means to be a Japanese woman* and *what it means to be a female hāfu*.

Furthermore, this study also suggests that experiences of social exclusion related to their physical appearances are not limited to *hāfu* women with Black racial backgrounds, as *hāfu* women with Caucasian backgrounds also face similar struggles. For instance, Emi, a British-Japanese *hāfu*, recounts being mocked for her larger nose:

> I've been targeted before, and, well, my nose is a bit bigger than a typical Japanese person's. They pointed out that feature and called me "Dobby" or something like that. I understand that I wasn't called "Dobby" just because of my western nose, but as at that time I wore glasses. So maybe not necessarily because I'm a *hāfu*, but there were certain features that were a bit different from those around me. (Ippan-teki Hāfu Gairon [General Overview of Half] Podcast 2023, 16:41)

Roebuck (2016, 202) argues that societal hostility toward *hāfu* children, particularly those with pronounced Black racial characteristics, reflects the nationalist and racist practices through which Japan sought to restore its racial and ethnic purity after its defeat in World War II. Nonetheless, Emi's experience underscores that this exclusionary perspective, stemming from Japan's fixation on the "homogeneous Japanese image" (Befu 2001), continues to impact *hāfu* individuals regardless of what mixed-race backgrounds they have. Physical traits perceived as foreign, such as Emi's large, defined nose, raise the question of whether the appearance of *hāfu* women will consistently serve as dual markers of otherness: both as a negative trait that contributes to their struggles in real lives and as a positive symbol of internationalism and Westernization in Japanese mainstream media (Iwabuchi 2014, 43).

(2) Representation of Language Proficiency

The representation of language proficiency is identified as the second theme used in female *hāfu* YouTubers' digital storytelling. In previous research on female *hāfu* celebrities in Japanese TV commercials, it was observed that portraying these individuals as fluent English speakers plays a significant role in reinforcing their "whiteness" and "Westernness" in Japan's mainstream media representations (Zhang 2024). Conversely, female *hāfu* YouTubers use the representations of their language proficiency as a means to disclose the challenges in live experiences and thereby provide an alternative perspective to challenge its conventional portrayal as reinforced by mainstream media.

Wako, a female *hāfu* YouTuber with mixed Brazilian and Japanese heritage, illustrates this in her video. Here, she reflects on the assumptions people make about her linguistic abilities due to her Brazilian heritage, while also emphasizing her deep connection to Japanese culture through her upbringing and daily habits:

> I'm told that I can speak Portuguese because I'm half Brazilian. But why is this happening? I don't know why people always say the way I talk is different from people who can speak English… these kinds of thoughts were torn out of context… I've been in Japan since I was born, eating ochazuke is my favorite. I love *ume ochazuke* (plum rice soup), I drink green tea, I eat *umeboshi* (pickled plums), I also eat *nuka-doko* (fermented rice bran pickles). (Satō Mikēra Wako [Sato Michaela Wako] 2020, 1:47)

On the one hand, Wako's storytelling serves as a reminder that language is often seen as a problematic identity marker for female *hāfu* individuals, who are expected to embody their non-Japanese heritage even if they are culturally and linguistically Japanese. On the other hand, her reflections on the label "*hāfu* speak foreign languages" engage with the broader scholarly debate about the authenticity of YouTubers' personal storytelling, which many scholars argue is often used as a strategy for self-branding to craft profitable public personas at the expense of authenticity (Chen 2013; Lutton 2019; Hu 2021). This study posits that the personal storytelling in female *hāfu* YouTubers' videos offers a more nuanced understanding of authenticity in online spaces. As exemplified in Wako's case, showing authenticity is a critical feature for the meaning-making of female *hāfuness on* YouTube, which allows female *hāfu* themselves to push back against the existing media commercialization of their identity. It serves to expose the complex realities of being *hāfu* and dismantle the media constructs that mainstream representation uses to profit from idealized portrayals of female *hāfu*.

Besides directly questioning existing societal stereotypes, YouTuber Cleo, a British-Japanese *hāfu*, uses her representation of English learning to critically reveal how the mainstream portrayals of English-speaking female *hāfu* neglect the personal effort of and challenges required for female *hāfu* individuals to maintain such language proficiency:

> With Dad, we used to practice every week, and I also read books and stuff, so I think I somehow managed to maintain it for a long time. But, you know, compared to native speakers, everyone around me speaks Japanese, and I don't use English in my daily life. Especially in conversations with people of the same age, it's not like I'm consciously switching languages. In that sense, I can still maintain it, but it drops a bit in level. Maybe I started getting a good foundation at eight and have been working hard and studying on my own since then. (Ippan-teki Hāfu Gairon [General Overview of Half] Podcast 2021, 1:16)

Reflecting Cleo's stance, this study suggests that while mainstream narratives have emphasized the representation of female *hāfu* as bilingual or speakers of non-Japanese foreign languages, the digital storytelling of female *hāfu* YouTubers addresses this gap by focusing on representing themselves as Japanese-speaking. This is exemplified by female YouTuber Aharin, a Japanese-Chinese *hāfu* raised speaking Chinese. In a video, she shared her childhood struggles with learning Japanese after migrating to Japan and discussed the sense of alienation she felt as a child due to her inadequate Japanese competency:

> I couldn't speak Japanese, so I went to KUMON. I studied things like "A-I-U-E-O." I also

> studied at home, memorizing Japanese by watching TV. I would pick up words from TV, memorize them, and then try using them at school for the next day. (Toaru Chūgokujin no "Muimui" [A certain Chinese "Muimui"] 2024, 5:05)

For Aharin, the portrayal of her bilingual image reveals a more complex process of language acquisition, which challenges the mainstream media's strategy of using bilingualism to create an idealized yet limited definition of female *hāfuness* (Zhang 2024). Her storytelling reframes the meaning of representing female *hāfu* as bilingual, not as an effortless trait that merely signifies the difference between the multilingual *hāfu* and the monolingual Japanese, but as a challenging process reflecting *hāfu* "becoming" Japanese, a hard-earned experience for *hāfu* individuals to reconcile their mixed heritages within a society where distinctions between Japanese and non-Japanese identities are deeply "encoded in the Japanese language." (Hasegawa and Hirose 2005, 247).

(3) The Representation of Cultural Identity

In examining how female *hāfu* YouTubers use digital storytelling to represent their cultural identities, this study finds that the alternative meaning of female *hāfuness* is primarily framed around the tension between the experiences of assimilating into Japanese society and maintaining their non-Japanese cultural heritage. For instance, female *hāfu* YouTuber Narumi (Filipino-Japanese) offers insight into how the representation of her *hāfuness* can be shaped by this dynamic:

> I was born in the Philippines but grew up in Japan. While my nationality is Filipino, I feel more like a *nadeshiko* at heart, with what you might call a *samurai* spirit. (Narumi/Japinay Girl 2022, 1:40)

By invoking *nadeshiko*, the cultural archetype of women embodying the "Japanese authentic aesthetic" (Yoshikawa 2021, 20), and the *samurai*, a figure that serves to symbolize Japan's "national uniqueness, military strength, and moral virtue" (Narroway 2008, 76), Narumi resists the prevalent media representations that cast the images of *hāfu* women as the perpetual "Japanese other." Instead, her storytelling reclaims alternative meanings for *hāfuness*—one that allows her to explore whether the representation of female *hāfuness* can be compatible with the dominant discourse on authentic representations of Japaneseness to foster a more inclusive understanding of female *hāfu* identity.

In contrast, Vlada, a Russian-Japanese female YouTuber, shared her experiences of overcoming the challenges of adapting to traditional Japanese culture while maintaining the cultural traditions of her non-Japanese origins.

> (In Russia) We didn't have the custom of saying things, like Tadaima (I'm home) or Okaeri (Welcome back), and I didn't know about saying Ojamashimasu (I am sorry to disturb you) when entering someone's home. I just thought what we did at home was normal, so when I visited someone else's house, I would just walk in casually and get scolded really badly for it. (Lana no Machikado Intabyū [Lana's Street Corner Interview] 2022, 11:15)

Her storytelling offers an important question: while mainstream Japanese media regularly acknowledge *hāfu* women for embodying non-Japanese, Euro-Americanized, internationalized traits (Kawai 2014; Iwabuchi 2014; Shimoji 2018), do these same characteristics assist in gaining

acceptance in real-life situations where society tends to value sameness over differences? Vlada's narrative sheds light on this disparity, illustrating that the traits of female *hāfuness* that are celebrated by mainstream Japanese media do not translate into social acceptance for a *hāfu* woman residing in Japan. From this perspective, her story offers an alternative meaning to female *hāfuness*, which could be seen as a lens for comprehending the ongoing difficulties that female *hāfu* individuals experience, where the conflict between preserving a cultural connection to their Japanese identity and embracing the non-Japanese side of their heritage is constantly negotiated inside the framework of Japanese society.

This theme of representing cultural identity is further exemplified in another video created by female YouTuber Riana (Australian-Japanese), in which she documented a female *hāfu joshikai* (a Japanese term describing the women-only party) in Yokohama (see Figure 1). As Laukmane (2019) suggests, Japanese women's consumption of alcohol and meat during *joshikai* challenges conventional gendered assumptions about socializing practices typically attributed to Japanese men. This video showcases three female *hāfu* YouTubers as they engage with societal perceptions of their "othered" image while authentically participating in Japanese cultural rituals. The depictions of their relaxed enjoyment of beer, meat, and electronic cigarettes contrast sharply with mainstream media portrayals of *hāfu* women, who are often represented as tidy, embellished, idealized, and Westernized. (Kawai 2014; Iwabuchi 2014; Shimoji 2018) Furthermore, it offers an alternative perspective on the scholarly view of female *hāfuness* as proposed by Shimoji:

> Feminizing *hāfu* as women who have beautiful looks, sexually unrestrained bodies, and speak poor Japanese, secures the masculine image of Japanese and stabilizes its main status in society. (Shimoji 2018, 16)

Figure 1.[4]

5. Conclusion

This article examines how female *hāfu* YouTubers utilize digital storytelling to represent themselves through three different themes: physical appearance, language proficiency, and cultural identity. The result shows that YouTube enables these YouTubers to participate in digital storytelling of life experiences in ways that redefine the stereotypical and limited aspects of physical

4 Screenshot from YouTube channel りあなわーるど (Riana Wārudo [Riana World] 2022). Ossan-kei *Hāfu* Joshi 3 Ninn-shū ga Ameyoko Jōriku [Three *Hāfu* Women with a "Middle-Aged Man" Vibe Land in Ameya-Yokoch] [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpVfHt3Ae_8> Screenshot taken at 9:14.

appearance, language, and cultural identity that have become the female hāfu image that is always portrayed in Japanese mainstream media. In this regard, within the context of YouTube, the idea of female *hāfuness* is represented as a means for female *hāfu* YouTubers themselves to reclaim their own definition of female *hāfuness*, regardless of mixed-race background, physical characteristics, language proficiency, or other culturally imposed expectations that Japanese society has placed upon the female *hāfu*.

As Vivienne (2016, 66) argues, digital storytellers are able to "reflect on their capacity to articulate who, when, and how they are; thumbing their noses at risk; claiming an 'I don't care' status." Thus, this article concludes that female *hāfu* YouTubers, as digital storytellers, are using their representation of self to redefine the perceptual boundaries that Japanese society has set between Japanese and *hāfu* identities and thus encourage a more inclusive representation of *hāfu* women in today's media landscape.

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