Analysis of Characteristics in Japanese 'Isekai' Web Novels Through Data and Examination of Sexual Ethics in Texts

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Abstract   This study examines the characteristics of the Japanese web novel genre "Isekai" through data-driven analysis and explores its cultural and social implications in contemporary Japanese society. Isekai is characterized by narratives where characters transition from the real world to another world, beginning a new life. It serves as a means of vicariously resolving unfulfilled desires and conflicts from reality, reflecting the desires of male readers. By analyzing Isekai web novel data, this study identifies that Isekai predominantly features high fantasy settings, narratives of adventure and settlement, and the use of "cheat" abilities as core elements. The analysis confirms that the genre caters to the fantasies of male readers. The case study of *Mushoku Tensei* reveals explicit depictions of male-centric sexual fantasies, portraying male-convenient sexual ethics, such as polygamy, in a natural and positive light. These sexual fantasies can be interpreted as a compensatory psychological response to suppressed masculinity in modern Japanese society, influenced by a stagnant economy, natural disasters, and the rise of women's rights. In conclusion, this study empirically demonstrates that Isekai reflects the desires and cultural trends of contemporary Japanese society, fulfilling male-centric fantasies. Isekai plays a significant social and cultural role in modern Japanese popular culture.

Keywords   Isekai; Web-novels; Data Analysis; Sexual Ethics; *Mushoku Tensei*; Shōsetsukaninarō

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1. Introduction

"Isekai (異 世 界 も の)" is a narrative structure frequently observed in Japanese subculture, particularly gaining prominence as a representative genre in web novels. This genre revolves around stories where characters transition from the real world to a fantasy world and begin a new life. It provides readers with an opportunity to escape the constraints of reality and explore their imaginative fantasies. The ability to reconstruct unfulfilled conflicts and desires within the space of a different world, offering vicarious satisfaction, serves as a key factor in the genre's popularity.

Previous research has emphasized the narrative features of Isekai that reflect the preferences of male readers (Park 22).[1] However, such discussions have primarily centered on a few representative works, limiting their capacity to identify the overall characteristics of the genre or capture broader trends. Systematic analyses of the trends inherent in this genre based on extensive data remain scarce. Moreover, discussions on how Isekai reflects cultural and social needs within Japanese society are still insufficient.

This study utilizes metadata from the representative Japanese web novel platform "Shōsetsuka ni Narō" to analyze the overall trends and characteristics of

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1   Park, Insung, has pointed out that the convenient construction of male protagonists in Japanese subculture is maximized in Isekai works, enhancing their narrative utility (22).

the Isekai web novel genre, and to validate previously discussed claims through data-based verification. Instead of directly handling the extensive text of individual works, this research adopts an approach that encompasses the entirety of web novels through the analysis of metadata. This method was strategically chosen to address time constraints in text processing and potential copyright issues from the outset. during the data collection process. By analyzing recurring keywords and major thematic elements derived from synopses within the metadata, the study seeks to identify the narrative, emotional, and social values that Isekai offers to its readers. In doing so, it aims to validate the claims from previous research regarding the male-centered consumption structure and specific narrative characteristics of the genre.

In addition, the study selects works that best reflect the trends identified through metadata analysis and conducts an in-depth textual analysis. By focusing on narrative structures, main character settings, conflict elements, and cultural contexts within these works, the research examines how Isekai reconstructs the desires of modern Japanese society and its readers.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the characteristics of the Isekai genre by combining data analysis with the textual analysis of representative works. Through this, it reveals the value that Isekai offers to the younger generation in modern Japan and examines how it reflects the desires and cultural trends of Japanese society. This study not only contributes to re-evaluating the cultural significance of Isekai but also serves as an essential resource for exploring the potential expansion of digital content research and cultural studies in the future.

2. Analysis of Data on Isekai Web Novels

Shōsetsuka ni Narō is the largest web novel platform in Japan, established in 2004, with approximately 1.14 million works submitted as of January 2025. This vast number of works and user base underscores the platform's significant position in the Japanese web novel market. The platform operates a dedicated API[1] for developers, granting access to metadata for all submitted works. In this study, Python was used to collect data via the API, and the JSON module was employed to parse the collected data. Additionally, the requests library was utilized to handle server access and data requests, while the pandas library was used to organize key analytical elements such as genre, keywords, synopses, and first publication dates for each work.

The Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform reflects the high popularity of the Isekai

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1   Application Programming Interface: A language or message format used for communication between an operating system and an application. It enables other applications or websites to utilize and access data effectively.

genre by featuring a dedicated Isekai ranking page on its main site, attracting the attention of readers. According to the platform's Help Center, this ranking includes works containing the keywords "Isekai Reincarnation (異 世 界 転 生)" or "Isekai Transition (異 世 界 転 移)", even if they are not officially categorized under the Isekai genre. This highlights the need to note that Isekai is not an officially recognized genre classification on the platform. Based on this criterion, this study defined works containing either the Isekai Reincarnation or Isekai Transition keywords as part of the Isekai corpus and collected corresponding data. Consequently, approximately 132,726 works were identified and analyzed (as of January 2025).

The collected data were analyzed using text mining techniques to examine the genre distribution, keyword frequencies, and key themes within the synopses of Isekai works. The primary objective was to identify trends in the Isekai genre, and the analysis results were visualized to facilitate a more intuitive understanding.

(1) Genre Distribution

The Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform requires authors to select a genre when submitting their works. The platform categorizes works into five primary genres, each consisting of over 20 subgenres: Romance (Isekai, Real-World Romance), Fantasy (High Fantasy, Low Fantasy), Literature (Pure Literature, Human Drama, History, Mystery, Horror, Action, Comedy), Science Fiction (VR Games, Space, Science Fiction, Panic), and Others (Fairy Tales, Poetry, Essays, Replays, Others).

As mentioned earlier, Isekai is not officially classified as a standalone genre within the platform's categorization system. Instead, the term Isekai is recognized as a subgenre under the primary genre of Romance. This subgenre specifically refers to works where romance takes place against the backdrop of an otherworldly setting. It is also worth noting that the Fantasy genre, although similar to traditional notions of fantasy, is uniquely categorized according to the platform's specific framework. This distinction highlights the need for careful consideration when analyzing these genre classifications.[1]

This study visualized the number of submitted works by genre in the Isekai corpus using bar charts to identify the major genre distributions. (Figure 1)

1　High Fantasy and Low Fantasy are defined as "stories set in a world different from the real world" and "stories incorporating fantasy elements into a world close to reality," respectively. These categories are distinguished by the degree of fantasy's unrealism, with high and low classifications. Detailed guidelines for each genre can be found in the Help Center.
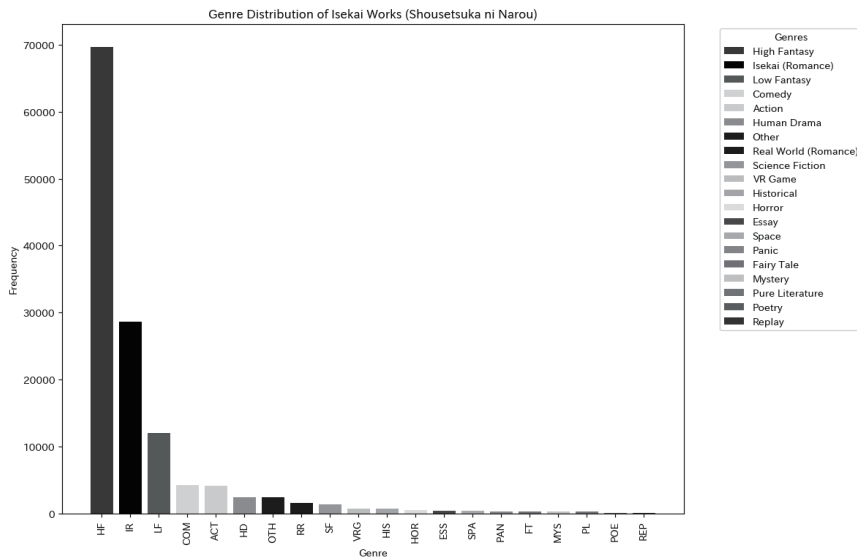
Figure 1

Study visualized the number of submitted works by genre in the Isekai corpus using bar charts to identify the major genre distributions. (Figure 1)

The analysis revealed that High Fantasy, set in a world completely different from reality, accounted for the largest proportion. In contrast, Low Fantasy, set in a world similar to reality, had a relatively smaller proportion. This indicates that Isekai works tend to strongly favor settings that are entirely detached from the real world.

(2) Keywords

The Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform encourages authors to input various types of keywords when submitting their works. This study extracted the 20 most frequently found keywords within the Isekai corpus to examine the thematic content of Isekai works (Figure 2).

The analysis revealed that the keywords Isekai Reincarnation and Isekai Transition, which define the Isekai genre, recorded the highest frequencies. Following these, the keywords "R15" and "Graphic Violence" also appeared frequently. R15 is a self-rating keyword automatically assigned to works intended for audiences aged 15 and above, indicating age restrictions. Similarly, Graphic Violence signifies the presence of visually intense or explicit content, suggesting a correlation with the R15 keyword. These findings indicate that Isekai works generally include settings with age restrictions and provocative content.
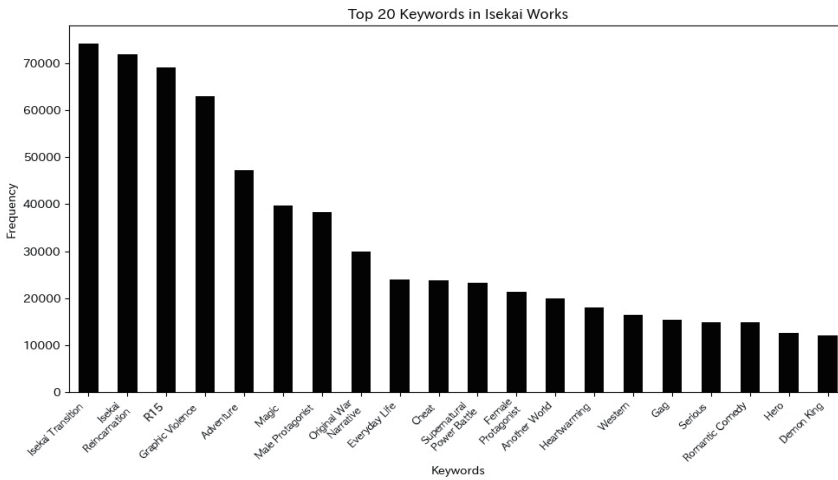
Top 20 Keywords in Isekai Works

Figure 2

The keyword "Cheat"[1], highlighted here for the first time, also stood out. Additionally, keywords related to adventure, such as "Adventure", "Magic", and "Hero", appeared frequently, confirming that narratives often involve journeys or quests in worlds entirely different from reality.
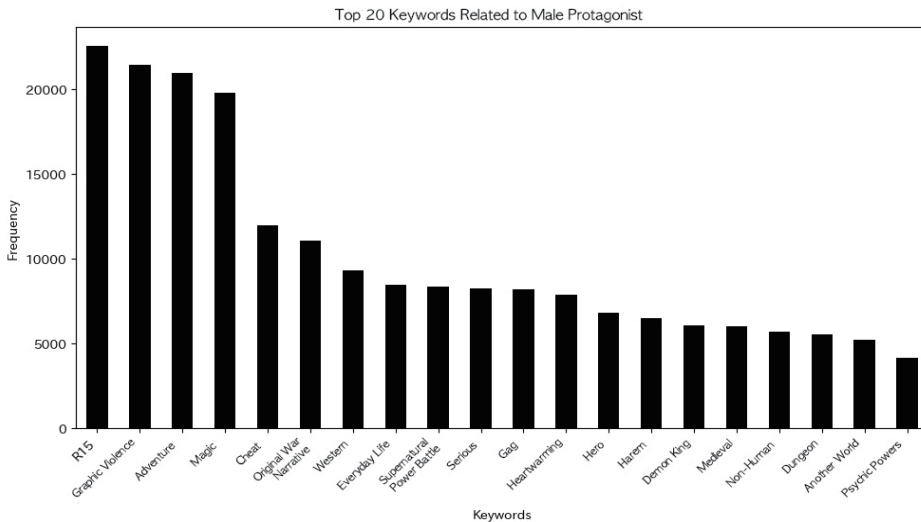
Top 20 Keywords Related to Male Protagonist

Figure 3

Meanwhile, the frequency of the keyword "Male Protagonist" was notably higher

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1   Cheat originates from the English word and refers to an unfair advantage given to the protagonist compared to other characters. This often manifests as unique abilities or skills that make the protagonist stand out.

than that of "Female Protagonist." To determine whether the content differs based on the protagonist's gender, keywords that frequently co-occurred with Male Protagonist and Female Protagonist were extracted in order of frequency (Figures 3 and 4).

Keywords frequently appearing alongside Male Protagonist and considered highly relevant included Cheat and "Harem."[1] This finding confirms the conclusions emphasized in previous discussions (Lu, 4 & Kim, 239)[2] through data analysis. Additionally, keywords related to power, such as "Supernatural Power Battle"[3] and "Psychic Powers," were also frequently identified.
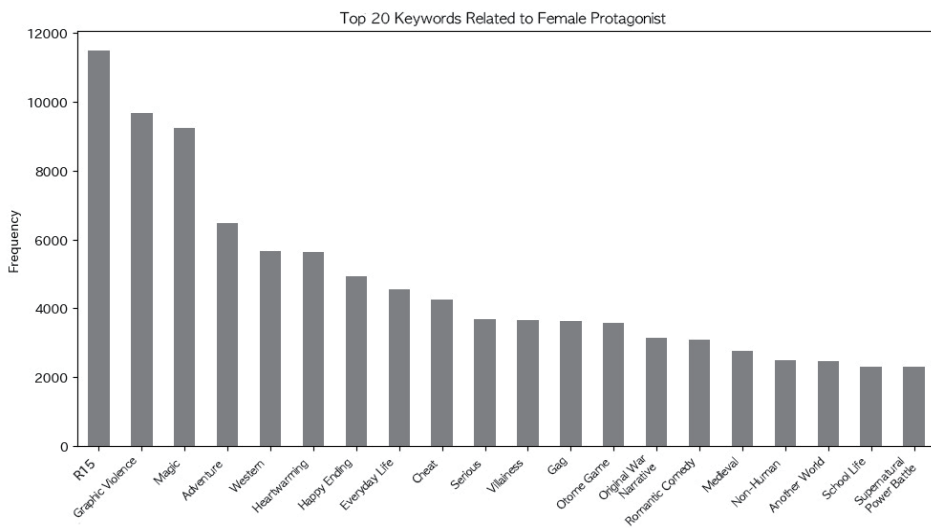

Figure 4

Keywords co-occurring with Female Protagonist included terms such as Cheat, indicating that convenient narrative structures are one of the key trends in Isekai works.

1   Harem originally refers to a family structure in Islamic culture consisting of one man and multiple women. However, in Japanese subculture, it describes a narrative structure where a male protagonist receives simultaneous affection and attention from multiple female characters.

2   Curtis Lu points out that the game-like narratives in Isekai, such as quests, level-up systems, and cheat abilities, fulfill the protagonist's desire for achievement and provide male readers with a high level of immersion (Lu, 4). Additionally, Bomin Kim highlights that relationships depicted in Isekai often revolve around repressed or forbidden male sexual desires in reality and idealized relationships based on unconditional affection, with the harem narrative being a representative example (Kim, 239).

3   Supernatural Power Battle refers to a genre centered on narratives where characters use supernatural abilities to compete against one another or resolve various incidents.

On the other hand, keywords like "Otome Game," "Villainess," and "Romantic Comedy," which were absent in association with Male Protagonist, frequently appeared. The presence of elements such as female-oriented games like Otome Game, specific character archetypes like Villainess[1], and romance-related themes suggests that works featuring a female protagonist are likely targeted at female audiences.

The frequency of the Male Protagonist keyword was higher than that of Female Protagonist, and keywords frequently co-occurring with Male Protagonist included terms like Harem, Abilities, and Power. This indicates that while Isekai works for female audiences, featuring romance or female-oriented game elements, do exist, themes related to harems, abilities, and power centered around male protagonists are more prevalent.

Furthermore, regardless of the protagonist's gender, keywords like Magic and Cheat, which represent convenient narrative structures, appeared frequently. This supports previous studies' discussions that Isekai primarily serves as a genre reflecting male readers' preferences, confirmed through data analysis to some extent.

(3) Plot Summaries

To examine the prevalent themes and content of the novels, the main word frequencies in the plot summaries of submitted works on the platform were analyzed. For this purpose, the plot texts of each work were collected and analyzed using the MeCab library for morphological analysis. Only nouns were extracted, and their frequencies were calculated. By analyzing word frequencies within the summaries, rather than relying solely on predefined keywords, the study aimed to gain a more detailed understanding of the works' content. To prevent incorrect segmentation or analysis errors for newly coined terms and modern vocabulary, the mecab-ipadic dictionary was utilized.

The results of analyzing frequently occurring words in the plot summaries of Isekai works are as follows (Figure 5). Words related to adventure, such as Magic, Hero, and "Demon King," frequently appeared, consistent with the findings in the keyword analysis. Additionally, terms like "Summoning" and "Reincarnation," which describe the process of entering another world, were also notable.

Notably, the frequent appearance of the term "Game" is significant. As mentioned earlier in the genre distribution analysis, Isekai works are typically set in

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1   Villainess refers to a type of female character commonly found in Japanese web novels, particularly in romance or Isekai genres. The term originates from Otome Games (female-oriented romance simulation games) and denotes an antagonist character who typically disrupts the romantic relationships of the main protagonist within the game. In recent web novels, however, the villainess is often reinterpreted as the protagonist.
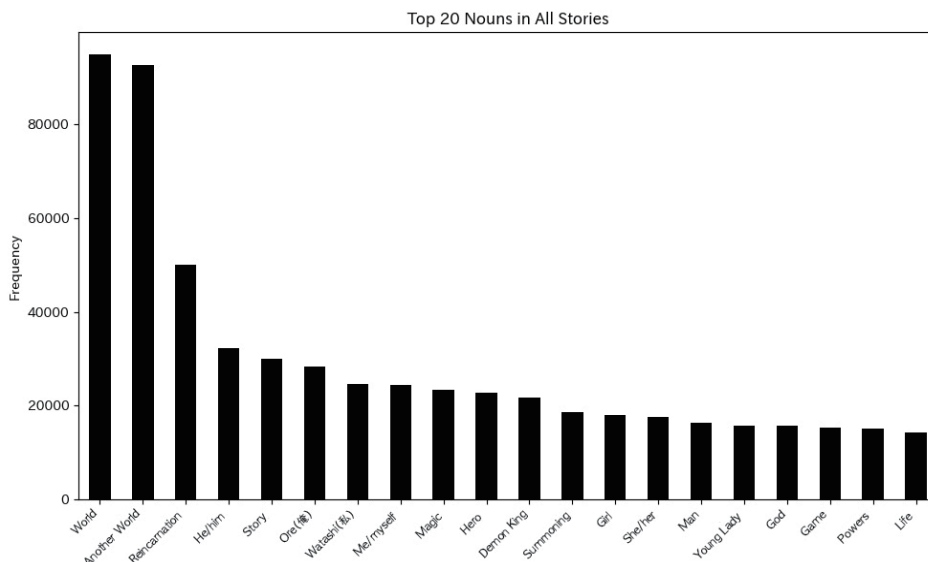
Figure 5

worlds completely detached from reality. The high frequency of this term suggests that such completely different worlds may often resemble game-like settings. Another noteworthy term is "Life," which appears frequently as well. This reflects the portrayal of living in a new world. While terms related to Adventure frequently appear, the recurrent use of Life, which conveys the act of living, indicates that Isekai works often focus on starting and settling into a new life. Moreover, this implies that it is common for these works to establish a setting where returning to the original world is unlikely.

From this analysis, it can be confirmed that Isekai works are set in worlds entirely different from reality, often incorporating game-like settings. Furthermore, the narratives prominently feature themes of adventure and life, highlighting the genre's distinctive focus not only on offering fantastical imagination but also on exploring adaptation and growth in new environments.

Through the above analysis, it was confirmed that Isekai works are set in worlds entirely different from reality, often incorporating game-like settings. Additionally, the narratives prominently feature themes of adventure and life, demonstrating that the Isekai genre not only provides readers with fantastical imagination but also explores adaptation and growth in new environments.

An analysis of keyword occurrences based on the protagonist's gender revealed that Male Protagonist appeared more frequently than Female Protagonist, often co-occurring with keywords such as Harem, Cheat, and Power. This supports previous

discussions that Isekai is a genre primarily reflecting the desires of male readers (Nam, 174),[1] a claim substantiated by data. In contrast, works centered around female protagonists exhibited unique trends targeting female readers, incorporating elements such as Otome Game and Villainess. However, shared keywords like Magic and Cheat, indicative of convenient narrative structures, further highlight the distinctive characteristics of Isekai.

This analysis confirms the features of Isekai previously suggested in discussions through data-driven evidence. In the following chapter, we will delve deeper into how readers' desires are reflected in this genre by examining a representative work of Isekai.

3. Sexual Ethics in Isekai Texts: A Focus on *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*

As examined earlier, the immense popularity of the Isekai genre stems from its reflection of male readers' desires, offering "(readers') unfiltered and raw fantasies" and providing "a more stimulating and direct form of vicarious satisfaction" (Kim, 240). This section explores how male desires are embedded in Isekai narratives and whether the explicit portrayal of such desires raises ethical concerns.

A representative work often referred to as the "symbol" of Isekai (Iida) or "a pioneering piece with a wide fanbase in the genre" (Editorial Team, Animege Plus) is the web novel *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation* (hereafter called *Mushoku Tensei*) by Rifujin na Magonote(理不尽な孫の手). Serialized on the Shōsetsuka ni Narō platform from November 2012 to April 2015, the work was published in 26 volumes by KADOKAWA from January 2014 to November 2022. It has also been adapted into manga, which has been serialized since June 2014. Furthermore, due to its popularity, the novel was adapted into an anime that aired on Japanese television from January 2021 to July 2024 and was later made available on Netflix starting in 2023, securing a global fanbase.

The novel's popularity can also be measured by its consistent top ranking on the Shōsetsuka ni Narō cumulative charts from October 2013 to February 2019 (Iida) and its series' cumulative circulation reaching 14.85 million copies as of February 2024 (LaNovelibrary).

The protagonist of *Mushoku Tensei* is a 34-year-old unemployed recluse who refuses to attend school after being severely bullied. He isolates himself from others, spending his days in his room browsing the internet, playing video games,

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1   Nam, Yoomin points out that research on Japanese web novels has predominantly focused on works targeting young male readers, the primary audience of light novels, resulting in analyses largely limited to male-oriented works (174).

and watching adult videos. After the death of his parents, who had cared for him, he is evicted from his home by his siblings and dies in a traffic accident. Following his death, he is reincarnated in another world as a baby named Rudeus Greyrat, retaining the memories of his previous life.

In his new life, Rudeus reflects on and regrets the mistakes of his past, resolving to live earnestly this time. He works hard, overcomes numerous challenges, and grows into a powerful magician. The story exemplifies a quintessential narrative structure of the Isekai genre, where a failure in the current life reincarnates into another world, leveraging past experiences and memories to become a highly skilled individual with significant advantages over others. It is not difficult to interpret the story as reflecting readers' desires for success and recognition in an alternate world, mirroring their unfulfilled aspirations in reality.

Another striking feature of *Mushoku Tensei* is its overt male-centric sexual fantasies. The protagonist, who had no interaction with the opposite sex in his previous life, begins to express and fulfill his suppressed sexual desires upon being reincarnated into the other world. In an interview, the author was asked about the frequent natural depiction of the characters' sexual lives, particularly deviant sexual behavior, and responded as follows:

> Rifujin na Magonote: In Japanese creative works, there are two polar opposite approaches to depicting sexual life: As "sacred" or as "pleasure." I suppose I got my inspiration because I thought there wasn't enough representation of the viewpoint that reproductive activity is natural to organisms. [...] Because it's an important part of the life of an organism, it's not wrong to call it sacred. However, it's also true that sex is associated with pleasure. You could also say that it's natural for people to treat sex as pleasure for as long as pleasure is intertwined with the act. [...] Incidentally, when writing the opening act of the story, I strongly emphasized Rudeus's perspective on sex as a thing of pleasure. It's only natural because he had no experience in his previous life, so the pleasure aspect was the only side he came into contact with. (Morrissy)

In *Mushoku Tensei*, the protagonist Rudeus' pursuit of sexual pleasure is depicted not only through his actions but also through his father, Paulo, who impregnates a maid and continues to live happily with both his wife and the maid. Additionally, the portrayal of Rudeus gaining a second and third wife reflects polygamy, presented as a natural form of marriage. And there is the scene where a child who is only 9 years old plays a joke on sexual harassment. Such depictions of tabooed sexual acts

and relationships in Japanese society are prominent. As a result, a debate over these sexual depictions and ethical views arose in China, leading to the suspension of the show on the animation streaming platform Bilibili, and the sponsors also halting their advertisements. The author claims to portray "natural" sexual life, but does this raise any issues regarding the sexual views and sexual ethics presented in *Mushoku Tensei*?

The characters in *Mushoku Tensei* generally have a very positive view of sexual life and activities. As the author suggests, sex is perceived as a "natural" act driven by instinct. Both the male protagonists and female characters wish for sexual relationships with their loved ones, with behaviors that could be considered sexually inappropriate being portrayed as playful, and even obsessive tendencies being depicted as "sacred" rituals. Therefore, it is depicted as acceptable, and even preferable, for the protagonist or his father to engage with individuals other than their wives, and for the protagonist to take multiple wives. This polyamory is presented as a natural family structure, where multiple women are simultaneously loved equally, leading to a more "harmonious" family dynamic. The depiction of male sexual desires is not overtly portrayed as problematic; instead, these male-centered sexual fantasies are shown as entirely "natural," without the repression of female sexuality, which forms the basis of the sexual ethics in this otherworldly setting.

Polygyny, the practice of one man having multiple wives, has been maintained in various cultural contexts both historically and in contemporary societies, and its ethical implications should be evaluated in diverse contexts. However, modern sexual ethics generally view the granting of the right to multiple spouses to men as restricting the rights of women and promoting inequality, thus criticizing polygyny as contradictory to gender equality. In societies such as Japan, where polygyny is prohibited, mutual respect between spouses and equal rights and responsibilities are considered fundamental values, making polygyny regarded as unethical.

However, in the world of *Mushoku Tensei*, polygamy is depicted as a situation in which the parties involved, particularly the women, voluntarily agree and are shown to enjoy equal rights, thus concealing the inequality and unethical nature that polygamy typically entails. While polygamy often arises in cultural and social contexts that suppress women's autonomy and choices, in *Mushoku Tensei*, the first wife, along with the second and third wives, are portrayed as accepting and desiring such a relationship. This portrayal hides the inherent discomforts and presents a male-centric, male-friendly sexual ethic as though it is justified.

In reality, such polygamy or harems, as seen in *Mushoku Tensei* and other

Isekai works, are impossible. As previously discussed, this is a significant feature in Isekai stories. It undoubtedly reflects the pure sexual fantasies of men whose power has gradually diminished in modern Japanese society, where gender equality and women's rights have become more widespread. The 2010s, when *Mushoku Tensei* was serialized, marked a period of stagnation following the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s, which was referred to as the "Lost Decade." While factors such as an aging population, a weakened yen, and the global financial crisis also played a role, it was primarily the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake that severely impacted Japanese society and economy. Additionally, the #MeToo movement, which gained traction globally in the 2010s, was not as strong in Japan as it was in other countries, but it still emerged and brought attention to women's rights. The desire to be compensated for socially and economically suppressed masculinity is reflected in the sexual ethics of Isekai stories, such as *Mushoku Tensei*, which exist in fictional worlds.

4. Conclusion

Isekai has evolved from a genre confined to Japanese web novels to one that is adopted across various media, including manga, anime, as well as web novels, webtoons, and dramas in Korea. This study seeks to explore the reasons behind the widespread fascination with the absurd idea of abandoning the real world without hesitation and shifting or reincarnating into a high-fantasy world to start a new life? This paper does not merely offer vague answers by analyzing a few works but aims to define the characteristics of the Isekai genre based on objective data, including genre distribution, keyword frequency, and thematic analysis, using data from 132,726 works.

Isekai shows genre characteristics centered around a high fantasy world, similar to games, where the main narrative involves adventures and settling into a new life in an unfamiliar environment, focusing on the protagonist's adaptation and growth. The frequency analysis of keywords reveals that Isekai largely reflects the desires of male readers, with common keywords like Magic or Cheat, which grant protagonists advantages to successfully venture and live in the new world.

The genre's focus on male desires is evident in the representative work of Isekai, *Mushoku Tensei*, where male-centered sexual desires are strongly emphasized. In the work, a sexual ethic is shown, where relationships between men and women, such as polygamy or harems, are unbalanced and the women voluntarily agree and approve of the male-dominant sexual relationships. This imbalanced sexual perception, which is prevalent in Isekai, aligns with the trends of the 2010s, a decade

marked by a prolonged period of economic stagnation following the collapse of the bubble economy, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and a growing sense of powerlessness in both human and societal systems. In this context, the #MeToo movement gained traction, highlighting the importance of women's rights.

Thus, Isekai, a genre that fulfills the compensatory desire of suppressed masculinity from the 2010s, emerged with the characteristic of providing a comfortable, male-centric, and convenient sexual fantasy, leading to its explosive popularity.

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