

Japanese High School Students' Perceptions of the Gender-Neutral Naming Trend

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Abstract

Contemporary Japanese names feature a broader range of gender expression and show a growing popularity of gender-neutral choices—trends reflected in baby name rankings and frequently discussed in the media, especially on parenting websites. The present study explores this phenomenon from the perspective of young people, who encounter such names more frequently than older generations. Through a questionnaire survey of 635 senior high school students, we examine how names associated with varying degrees of masculinity and femininity are received by boys and girls, and how these perceptions vary depending on the gender of the name bearer. The findings suggest that Japanese youth are relatively open to gender-neutral names and those more commonly given to the opposite gender. Female students demonstrate greater openness to such names, while male students are less receptive. Familiarity with a name's bearer significantly influences how "natural" the name feels for a specific gender. The tested names that deviate from gender stereotypes are viewed more positively on girls, but they are also well received on boys. These findings are contextualized within broader trends in social acceptance and gender fluidity in naming practices.

Keywords: anthroponyms, first names, gender, Japan, naming, youth

Introduction

In recent years, headlines like "Genderless Names Are Trending!" (Baby Calendar 2021) and "Genderless Names Are Booming for Boys!" (Baby Calendar 2022) have become increasingly common in Japan. Numerous articles now feature lists of the best gender-neutral names and offer recommendations for their selection, reflecting their growing presence in annual rankings of popular names for both boys and girls. This trend has gained momentum over the past two decades, and names that can be given to both genders are becoming more common among today's children and youth (Barešová & Nakaya 2025). Since the late twentieth century, Japanese given names have undergone significant changes and diversification (e.g., Unser-Schutz 2016a; Makino 2012; Kobayashi 2009; Satō 2007), influenced by rising individualism, globalization, and a growing focus on gender issues. The number of new and unique names has risen significantly (Ogihara et al. 2021; Ogihara 2015). In contrast to the more traditional, gender-specific names which are common among today's grandparents, names of the youngest generations display a broader range of sound patterns and kanji,¹ sometimes without clear gender indicators.

Names convey important aspects of a person's identity in society (Pilcher 2016; Bloothoof & Onland 2011; Alford 1988), and play a significant role in shaping first impressions (Mehrabian 2001; Steele & Smithwick 1989). Names that challenge societal expectations can create both positive and negative impressions, and they may be perceived differently depending on the gender of the bearer. For example, individuals with easy-to-pronounce names are viewed more positively than those with names that are difficult to pronounce (Laham et al. 2012). In Japan, men with names that have uncommon readings may have fewer marriage opportunities compared with those with more familiar names (Ogawa & Takikawa 2024). A name that reflects a specific racial or ethnic background can impact an individual's likelihood of being considered for employment in the US (Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004), Great Britain (Wood et al. 2009), and Australia (Booth et al. 2012). Huang and Wang (2022) observed a mild yet statistically significant correlation between the gendered nature of names and their career prospects for both men and women in China. According to Anderson and Schmitt (1990), American women with unique names are generally viewed more favorably than men with unique names. Women whose names are associated with the opposite gender are perceived more positively than men whose names are associated with the opposite gender, as men are often subject to stricter gender stereotyping than women (Lieberson et al. 2000; Barry & Harper 1993, 1982; Slovenko 1986).

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping personal lives, social dynamics, and cultural frameworks. It is also an area where complex questions of justice, identity, and even survival arise (Connell 2009). Research indicates that contemporary views on gender and sex are more fluid and are now less confined to a binary understanding than in the past (Schudson et al. 2019). In Japan, while traditional gender roles—such as the female homemaker and male breadwinner—still hold influence, new models of femininity and masculinity are gaining visibility, particularly in media and pop culture. These emerging gender identities reflect broader global changes in gender perceptions, as well as generational shifts within Japan itself (Dales & Taga 2021).

In this context of shifting gender norms, the present study aims to explore how Japanese youth perceive their peers' names in relation to gender. Specifically, it investigates how gender-neutral names and names associated with varying degrees of masculinity and femininity are received by boys and girls, and how these perceptions depend on the gender of the name bearer. We focused on senior high school students for two main reasons; adolescence is a formative period during which individuals shape their identity and societal role (Alderman et al. 2020; Sawyer et al. 2018), and today's high school students have grown up in a time and environment where gender-neutral names have become increasingly visible. A recent study by (Barešová et al. 2025) suggests that perceptions of names in relation to gender are shaped not only by the name's inherent characteristics but also by the individual's social environment and the reactions their name elicits. School occupies much of Japanese youth's daily lives, and the dynamics within mixed-gender and single-gender settings may differ significantly, influencing name perceptions. Thus, the present study also aims to examine whether students in mixed-gender and single-gender school environments differ in their perceptions of names.

Japanese Names: Selection and Gender Expression

Japanese parents have considerable freedom in choosing names for their children. Unlike in countries such as the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Iceland and Slovakia, where naming options are restricted to an official list and exceptions require approval (Walkowiak 2016), Japan allows for a much wider selection. Contemporary names are predominantly written in kanji,² although it is also possible to use one of the two phonetic syllabaries—hiragana or katakana—or a combination of kanji and one of these syllabaries. Typically, the name selection process begins with choosing the phonological form, followed by the graphic form—that is, assigning kanji or opting for hiragana or katakana. Kanji can convey desired meanings and associations, evoke a pleasant image, and have an auspicious stroke count which is believed to predict a favorable fate for the child (e.g., Kobayashi 2009). Other priorities are also considered. A single phonological form can be represented by various kanji, each conveying a different impression, and, conversely, a specific kanji combination can often be read in more than one way.

Within the name creation process, names are usually assigned gender through sounds or kanji associated with a particular gender. The strongest indicator of gender is the last syllable in the phonological form and the last kanji in the graphic form (Barešová et al. 2024). For example, the name *Haruto* is generally recognized as a male name due to the final *-to*, while *Haruna* is considered a female name because of the final *-na*. Similarly, certain kanji predominantly appear in male names based on the sounds they represent or their strong associations with masculinity, while others are predominantly found in female names or are closely associated with femininity. Specific lengths of the phonological form and the use of hiragana can also be gender specific.

The flexibility in name creation allows for names that express gender in both their phonological and graphic forms, as well as in only one or in neither. It is possible to create a name that is gender-neutral in its phonological form but feminine or masculine in its graphic representation, or vice versa. Additionally, some names lack gender-specific features in either form. For example, the name *Chihiro* 千尋 ('thousand' + 'fathom'; 'great depth/height') does not indicate gender in either its phonological or graphic form and is used for both boys and girls. However, when the name *Chihiro* is written as 千大, it appears masculine because the second character, meaning 'large' or 'big,' is almost exclusively found in boys' names. Similarly, the recently popular name *Mizuki* can be written with various kanji combinations. While the name *Mizuki* 瑞稀 ('youth, freshness' + 'rare') is used for both genders, 瑞姫 is strongly feminine, as 姫 'princess' is exclusively found in girls' names. On the other hand, the name 心 ('heart, mind') is an example of a name that is gender neutral in its graphic form, but its gendered perception is shaped by its pronunciation—*Shin* or *Jin* is typically used for boys, while *Kokoro* or *Koko* is more frequently used for girls.

Gender-neutral names are most commonly gender neutral in their phonological form, a trend highlighted in the media. Parenting websites that offer advice on gender-neutral names often recommend names with a gender-neutral sound and suggest making them gender distinctive through their graphic form. For this reason, in this study, we focus on the phonological form of contemporary names.

Gender-neutral names are generally defined as names with a relatively balanced gender distribution, which various authors base on differing ratios (cf., Seguin et al. 2021; Leino 2014; Lieberman et al. 2000). While most names are assigned almost exclusively to one gender (Alford 1988), a small number are given to roughly equal numbers of boys and girls, and this distribution can change over time. Leibring (2018) proposed a more nuanced categorization with no fixed boundaries to illustrate that names exist on a spectrum between purely gender specific and entirely gender neutral. In addition to these two categories, she identifies

gender-contrary names, which are “traditionally attributed to one gender, but occasionally given to persons belonging to the other”, and gender-crossing names, which are “mostly used for individuals of one gender, but increasingly also for individuals of other genders” (2018, 306–307). Although Japanese naming books typically provide separate lists for boys’ names and girls’ names, and the vast majority of names are gendered, there are no strict gender boundaries, allowing parents to give a boy a name traditionally associated with girls, or vice versa.

Method

Participants

Data for this study were collected in spring 2023 through a printed survey questionnaire completed in class by 692 senior high school students from two mixed-gender schools and one all-boys school. All the schools were located in urban areas—two in the Kansai region and one in the Kanto region. Thirty-five responses were excluded due to signs of inattentive or meaningless completion.³ Additionally, twenty-one participants did not report their gender, and one was a non-Japanese national, leading to their exclusion. The final sample consisted of 635 participants, with 154 identifying as female (24.25%) and 481 as male (75.75%). Among the boys, 268 (55.72%) attended a boys’ school. Participants also reported their age ($M = 17.15$, $SD = 0.62$), in addition to their gender and nationality.

Procedure

After obtaining approval from our institution’s Research Ethics Panel,⁴ we approached several senior high schools, to which we had been introduced by our partner universities. We presented our intended research activity to them, providing detailed information about the survey, including a sample of the questionnaire, and a letter for the parents informing them about the survey and giving them the option to express disagreement with their child’s participation. Three schools agreed to participate, including a boys’ school. We also contacted two girls’ schools, but they eventually declined to participate, presumably because of their busy schedules.

The questionnaire was written in Japanese. The introductory section contained a brief explanation of the research project and instructions for completing the questionnaire. The requested socio-demographic information included gender, age, and nationality. The main section contained a set of questions regarding fifteen names (presented in table 1 below). Participants were tasked with assessing the masculinity or femininity of each name on a five-point scale, with “I perceive it as a man’s name” at one end and “I perceive it as a woman’s name” at the other. A study conducted by Van Fleet and Atwater (1997) demonstrated that the direction of the scale, whether from masculine to feminine or vice versa, yielded no significant difference in results. Next, participants were asked to indicate, on a five-point scale anchored as “It feels very natural (I find it very natural)” at one end and “It feels very unnatural (I find it very unnatural)” at the other, their feelings regarding the name bearer being a woman and the name bearer being a man. Additionally, they were asked, through a yes/no question, if they knew anyone with the given name, including celebrities, anime characters, or literary figures, and asked that they specify the gender of the individual/character (“man”, “woman”, “I know both”).

The fifteen names used in the questionnaire were drawn from a dataset of 15,058 names of children born between 2008 and 2022 (7,411 boys and 7,647 girls) collected from Baby Calendar,⁵ an information website on pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare. These names represent all entries submitted to the “Akachan no Nazuke Episōdo Taishō” [Baby Name-Selection Story Campaign] during this period, in which parents voluntarily share their babies’ names along with the reasoning behind their choices. As the website does not provide demographic data on its users, we cannot directly assess the extent to which the dataset covers all regional and social contexts. However, given the website’s widespread use—the official application reaching over ten million users each month⁶—we assume it reflects reasonably diverse naming practices across Japan. This assumption is further supported by Unser-Schutz (2017), who found no significant differences in name choices between municipalities or between urban and rural areas, suggesting that naming trends are relatively consistent nationwide.

The names were selected based on the following categories adapted from Leibring (2018): (1) gender-specific (further subdivided into names typically given to boys and those given to girls), (2) gender-crossing (further subdivided into those primarily given to boys and those primarily given to girls) and (3) gender neutral (distributed relatively evenly between boys and girls). Each category contains three names with very similar F-ratios⁷ and, where possible, morphological diversity. The names were written in hiragana⁸ (e.g., *Haruto* written as はると) and ordered according to Japanese convention, an equivalent of alphabetical order. Participants were instructed to assess each name based on its sound and not on the way it was written.

Table 1: Names Used in the Survey

Name	Boys	Girls	F-Ratio
Gender-Specific: Given to Boys			
Haruto	174	0	0.00
Riku	86	3	0.03
Yūma	78	0	0.00
Gender-Specific: Given to Girls			
Akari	2	97	0.98
Honoka	0	90	1.00
Mei	3	94	0.97
Gender-Crossing: Primarily Given to Boys			
Ibuki	34	6	0.15
Saku	14	2	0.13
Yūki	68	11	0.14
Gender-Crossing: Primarily Given to Girls			
Rin	9	70	0.88
Rio	13	81	0.86
Satsuki	6	28	0.82
Gender-Neutral			
Aoi	50	77	0.61
Hinata	69	43	0.38
Yū	25	34	0.58

Data Analysis

The ratings provided by participants on a five-point scale were analyzed using proportional odds logistic regression models. Since each participant rated fifteen names, the data were treated as repeated measures, with the participant (635 levels) included as a random factor in each model.

The model examining whether a given name is perceived as more masculine or feminine included two fixed-effect regressors: (1) the name, represented as a fifteen-level variable, and (2) the participant's gender. For certain analyses, the regressor name was replaced with a category of names listed in Table 1.

The responses to the questions “Do you consider this name natural for a man?” and “Do you consider this name natural for a woman?” were analyzed separately. As in the previous analysis, the models included name (or name category) and the participant's gender as regressors. To test the effect of knowing someone with a given name, we added a dichotomous regressor indicating whether the participant knew a male bearer of the name (for the male naturalness assessment) or a female bearer (for the female naturalness assessment). This regressor was tested in interaction with the name regressor.

The advantage of proportional odds models lies in their ability to present results in several meaningful formats. One common format is the odds ratio, which indicates how many times greater the odds of receiving an agreeable response are for one group compared to another. This remains consistent regardless of the threshold used to define an agreeable response (i.e., the proportionality of odds). The second format, used in the graphical representation of our results, is the mean class. The mean class represents the average value of the ordinal variable, calculated from the estimated probabilities for each level. Importantly, it is not influenced by the unequal sample sizes of men and women and reflects the overall mean across these groups. All calculations were performed in the R environment using the ordinal (Christensen 2022) and emmeans (Lenth 2023) packages.

Results

Perception of Names in Terms of Gender

The results of the name ratings as masculine or feminine closely aligned with the corpus-based F-ratios (Pearson’s $r = 0.96$, $p < .001$). The largest discrepancies were observed for the names *Saku* (a name primarily given to boys) and *Riku* (a boys’ name), which were rated closer to the feminine end of the spectrum than expected. The gender of the evaluator had a small but statistically significant effect on the ratings. Male students generally provided more polarized ratings, perceiving names in the categories “Gender-specific: girls” and “Gender-crossing: primarily girls” as more strongly feminine, and names in the categories “Gender-specific: boys” and “Gender-crossing: primarily boys” as more strongly masculine. In contrast, female students’ ratings were less polarized. This effect was statistically significant, as indicated by the interaction between the participant’s gender and the name category, $\chi^2(4) = 35.92$, $p < 0.001$. The effect was particularly evident for names typically assigned to boys. In this case, male students were 1.72 times more likely than female students to label such names as masculine. Similarly, for names that are gender-crossing yet predominantly given to boys, male students were 1.69 times more likely to rate them as masculine. In contrast, for names usually given to girls, male students were 1.21 times more likely to label them as feminine, while for gender-crossing names primarily associated with girls, the effect was virtually negligible, with male students being, on average, only 1.03 times more likely to do so. One name from this category (*Satsuki*) even exhibited the opposite pattern. The average ratings for each name by male and female raters are displayed in figure 1.

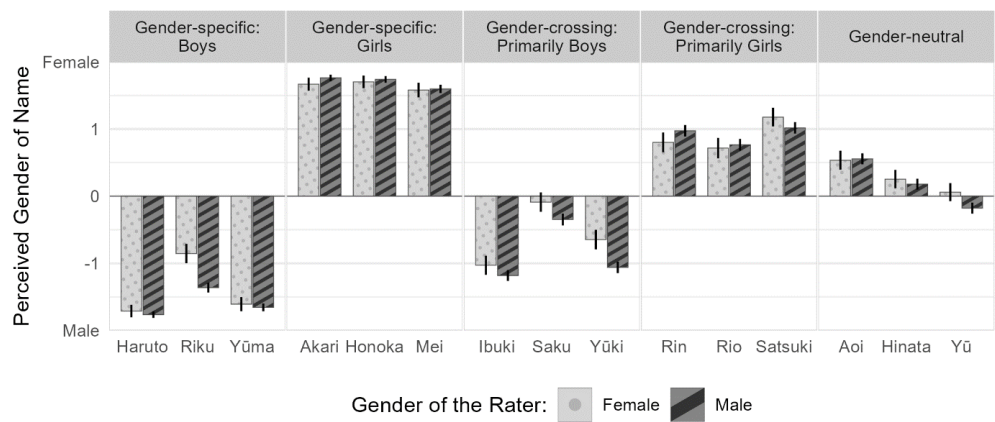
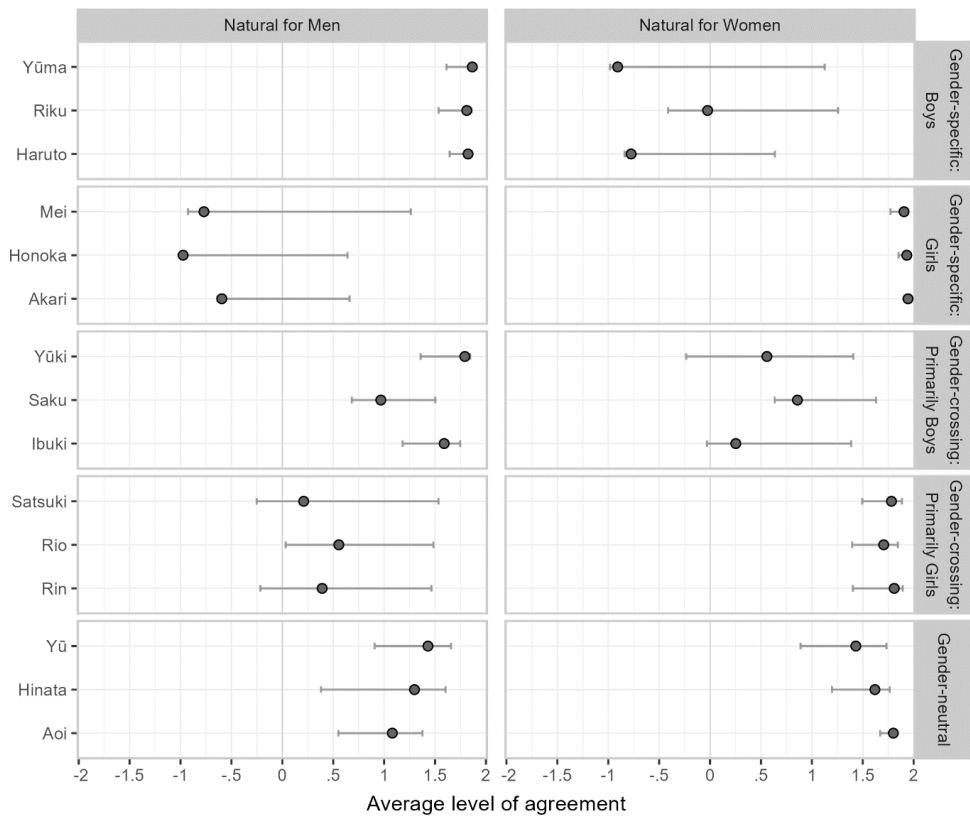


Figure 1: Perceived Masculinity and Femininity of Names by the Gender of the Rater

Note: The figure shows the perceived gender of names based on ratings from male and female respondents. The y-axis represents perceived gender, ranging from -2 (male) to +2 (female), while the x-axis categorizes names into five groups based on gender associations. Each bar represents the mean perceived gender rating for a given name. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Perception of Names as Natural for Men and Women

The perception of whether a particular name is natural for a man or for a woman was moderately correlated with the corpus-based F-ratios ($r = -0.54$ for men, $r = 0.62$ for women, both $p < 0.001$). However, the limited strength of this correlation indicates that other factors also influence these perceptions. Knowing a person of the relevant gender who bears the name plays a crucial role. When assessing whether a name is natural for a man, familiarity with a man who has that name increased the odds of an agreeable response by a factor of 9.66 ($p < .001$). The effect size varied across name categories, with the most substantial effect observed for gender-specific female names (odds ratio = 23.32). Similarly, when evaluating whether a name is perceived as natural for a woman, knowing a female with that name increased the odds of an agreeable response by a factor of 7.81 ($p < .001$). This effect was most pronounced for gender-specific male names (odds ratio =



29.45). Mean ratings for each name are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Perception of Names as Natural for Men and Women Based on Familiarity with a Name Bearer

Note: The displayed ranges illustrate how the mean responses vary depending on whether respondents know someone with the name. In the left panel (Natural for Men), the left bound represents responses from individuals who do not know a man with that name. The right bound reflects the average response from respondents who do know a man with that name. The right panel (Natural for Women) follows the same pattern for women. The point is not centered within this range because, in most cases, the number of respondents who do or do not know someone with the name is highly unbalanced. For example, *Riku* is seen as not natural for women by those unfamiliar with a female *Riku* (naturalness ≈ -0.4) but fairly natural by those who know one (1.25), resulting in a weighted average just below 0.

Previous research has shown that a woman with a masculine name is perceived more favorably than a man with a feminine name, likely because men are subject to stricter gender stereotyping than women (Liebersson et al. 2000; Barry & Harper 1993, 1982; Slovenko 1986). However, our data offer only limited capacity to explore this phenomenon. Since we are working with a limited selection of names, it is difficult to generalize these findings to the entire population of names. With this limitation in mind, we can conclude that our results are consistent with this assumption. The mean rating of male names on women was -0.57, 95% CI [-0.66, -0.49], and female names on men received a rating of -0.77, 95% CI [-0.86, -0.69]. Differences in the ratings of names borne by men and women were also evident for gender-neutral names. On average, these names were rated as more natural for women ($M = 1.45$, 95% CI [1.39, 1.51]) than for men ($M = 1.07$, 95% CI [0.98, 1.15]), with an odds ratio of 2.66 ($p < .001$). However, it is important to note that these results, based on only three names, should not be considered conclusive for all gender-neutral names.

The results were again influenced by the gender of the raters (figure 3). Girls were generally more likely than boys to give positive ratings. On average, girls were 1.93 times more likely than boys to consider any name natural for a man, and 2.51 times more likely to consider any name natural for a woman (both $p < 0.001$). This effect was most pronounced for gender-neutral names, with odds ratios rising to 2.46 and 4.12, respectively. Although the results suggest that boys are generally more sensitive to deviations from gender clarity in names, it should be noted that Japanese students tend to be relatively open to accepting names regardless of the bearer's gender. Except in cases where participants were assessing the naturalness of a gender-specific name for someone of the opposite gender, the average ratings from both boys and girls were positive (i.e., agreeable) across all name categories.

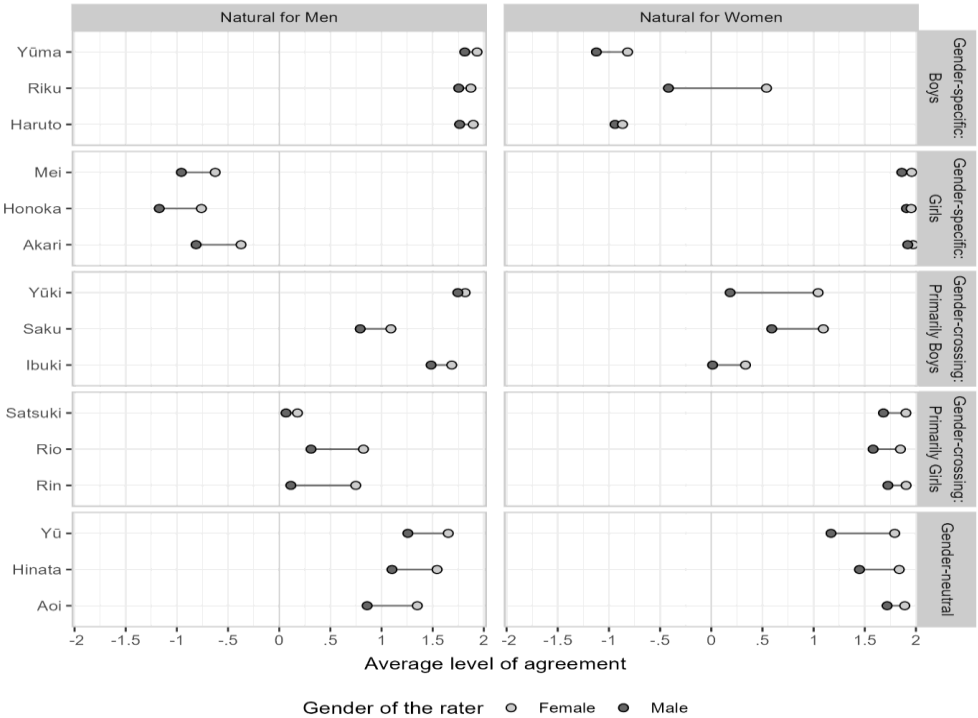


Figure 3: Perception of Names as Natural for Men and Women Based on the Rater's Gender

Note: The graph shows the average level of agreement among male and female raters regarding whether specific Japanese names feel natural for men or women. Names are categorized as gender specific (for boys or girls), gender crossing (primarily boys or primarily girls), or gender neutral.

Additionally, the data allow us to examine how boys from different school environments perceive the gender naturalness of names by comparing responses from boys in an all-boys school with those in co-educational settings. The results reveal statistically significant differences in responses to whether a name feels natural for men ($\chi^2(15) = 109.78$, $p < 0.001$) and for women ($\chi^2(15) = 40.73$, $p < 0.001$) between boys from co-educational and all-boys schools. In most cases (24 out of 30), the lowest level of agreement was observed among boys from the all-boys school, the highest among girls, and responses from boys in mixed schools fell between these extremes. However, despite this trend, the pattern cannot be unequivocally confirmed, as shown by the odds ratios: 1.06 ($p = 0.598$) for the question regarding whether a name feels natural for men and 1.16 ($p = 0.198$) for the question regarding whether it feels natural for women.

Discussion

Summary of Results

Our findings suggest that Japanese youth generally demonstrate considerable openness to accepting names regardless of the bearer's gender. With the exception of cases where participants evaluated the suitability of a gender-specific name for an individual of the opposite gender, both male and female participants gave positive (i.e., agreeable) average ratings across all name categories. Even names perceived as strongly masculine, such as *Yūma* and *Haruto*, or strongly feminine, such as *Mei* and *Honoka*, were not viewed as entirely unnatural when given to the opposite gender. A key factor influencing perceptions was whether participants knew someone of the relevant gender with the name.

Male and female participants differed in how they perceived names in relation to gender. Boys generally viewed names as more strongly gender defined than girls, perceiving names given to boys or primarily given to boys as more masculine, and those given to girls or primarily given to girls as more feminine than female respondents did. While both boys and girls were receptive to names that deviate from common gender associations, girls tended to view them more positively. Moreover, boys from co-educational and all-boys schools showed statistically significant differences in their responses, suggesting that the gender composition of an individual's social group may influence their perceptions of names in relation to gender. Finally, the tested gender-neutral names were perceived as more natural for girls than boys. Similarly, gender-crossing and gender-specific names given to the opposite gender were generally more favorably received for girls than for boys.

Societal Implications and Social Change

The openness to names that challenge traditional gender norms may stem from the cultural environment in which Japanese youth are raised. In Japanese culture, discussing names and their meanings is a common and enjoyable practice. Self-introductions often involve highlighting a unique aspect of one's name to make it more memorable. This emphasis on names extends to parenting, as contemporary parents are highly deliberate in selecting names carefully tailored to their child, reflecting aspirations, the time of birth, hopes for a happy life, or other meaningful aspects. They readily share the story behind the name's selection with their children, reinforcing the idea that names carry personal significance. This practice is further reinforced in elementary schools, where students are often assigned to ask their parents why they chose their name, what meaning it holds, and what they hoped to convey through it, fostering an appreciation for name diversity from an early age.

Today's adolescents are growing up in a social environment where names are more diverse than in previous generations, making them accustomed to names that stand out. This exposure to a wide variety of names appears to shape their perspectives. During our research, a recurring theme emerged in informal conversations with students: the belief that name selection is "jiyū" 'free' and that as long as parents have a meaningful reason behind their choice, no name should be considered bad or inappropriate. This perspective, shaped by cultural practices surrounding names and a growing familiarity with naming diversity, may foster greater receptiveness to a wider range of names as natural.

Another possible explanation for the relative openness to accepting names regardless of the bearer's gender, as observed in our study, is the increasing value placed on uniqueness and originality in contemporary Japanese society. Although names that are given to both boys and girls have become more common in recent decades, they remain significantly less frequent than gender-specific names, which lends them a sense of uniqueness. While overly novel names may face negative reactions from the general public

(Unser-Schutz 2016b), uniqueness and originality are increasingly valued (Ogihara 2021, 2015; Kobayashi 2009). The relationship between choosing a gender-neutral name and the desire for an unusual and distinctive name has been noted previously (Barry & Harper 1982). A recent study on young Japanese individuals with gender-neutral names (Barešová et al. 2025) found that uniqueness was one of the aspects they appreciated most about their names. This growing appreciation for uniqueness may, at least in part, explain why Japanese youth are receptive to names regardless of gender and consider even unconventional choices as more natural.

An individual's familiarity with a name—specifically, knowing someone of a certain gender who has that name—plays a crucial role in shaping name perception, as participants were more accepting of a name's gender-neutral or cross-gender usage when they knew someone with that name. This supports previous findings on the role of social exposure in modifying linguistic and cultural norms (Lieberson et al. 2000; Van Fleet & Atwater 1997; Barry & Harper 1982). It also suggests that as gender-neutral names become more common, they may further reinforce a cultural shift toward more fluid gender identities in naming practices.

The greater receptiveness of female students aligns with broader trends in social attitudes. Studies have shown that women tend to be more accepting of diverse identities and beliefs (Schnabel 2018) and are generally more supportive of sexual minorities than men (Lin & Lee 2024; Kite & Whitley 1998). This pattern is reflected in naming practices as well. Makino (2017) proposes that gender-related changes in Japanese names, particularly the softening of boys' names in recent decades, may be linked to the increased involvement of women, especially mothers, in the name selection process. Historically, naming decisions were primarily made by men, particularly fathers. A survey by Sakuma (1964) of 1,250 individuals born in the post-war years found that 41% had their names chosen by their father, 5% by both parents, and none by the mother alone. Today, both parents are involved (Unser-Schutz 2019), with women often taking the lead in choosing names (Barešová & Janda 2023). Their more flexible views on gender, as also observed in our study, may contribute to a greater acceptance of names that blur traditional gender boundaries, such as male names with feminine qualities.

Changes in school environments may also play a role in shaping future perceptions of names with respect to gender. As the vast majority of Japanese schools are now co-educational (Japan Statistical Office 2023) and traditional gendered school practices—such as using the suffix *-chan* for girls and *-kun* for boys or assigning uniforms along gender lines—are gradually diminishing (Ogi 2018; Sugii & Hayashi 2018; Terasawa 2022), the subtle gender-based differences in name perception may become even smaller in the future. With interactions between boys and girls becoming more fluid, naming conventions may continue to evolve toward greater neutrality.

Finally, the way gender-neutral names are perceived in Japan differs from patterns reported in other cultures. Earlier studies in the U.S. show that gender-neutral names tend to originate from boys' names and are more readily accepted for girls (Lieberson et al. 2000; Barry & Harper 1993, 1982). This trend has also been observed in other countries, including countries where gender-neutral names are less common, such as Bulgaria (Vlahova-Angelova 2025) or Spain (Fernandez Juncal 2025). A distinct name for a woman is often seen as a sign of individuality, whereas for a man, it may be perceived as odd or unusual (Anderson & Schmitt 1990). Similarly, in China, the convergence of male and female names over the past century has been largely driven by the defeminization of female names (Huang & Wang 2022)—that is, the adoption of Chinese characters that are gender neutral or less overtly feminine. While characters associated with masculinity tend to be viewed as broadly applicable to both genders, those linked to femininity are rarely used for men without being devalued (Li & Allasonnière-Tang 2025).

Japan, however, presents a contrasting pattern. Many widely used gender-neutral names, such as *Hinata* and *Aoi*, originated as girls' names or first became popular as names for girls (Makino 2017). Unlike in Western contexts, where gender neutrality in naming often arises from boys' names becoming appealing for girls, Japan also exhibits the opposite dynamic: feminine names are more readily embraced for boys. The relatively small difference in how gender-neutral names are perceived depending on the bearer's gender, along with their positive reception for boys, suggests a broader cultural shift. Rather than reflecting a preference for masculine traits, this trend highlights a distinctive aspect of Japanese society, where femininity can be fluid and adaptable in shaping identity. This contrasts with cultures that more strongly resist the adoption of feminine names for boys and may offer valuable insights into evolving gender norms in Japan.

Theoretical Implications in Onomastics

Our study contributes to onomastics by demonstrating how name perception reflects changing attitudes toward gender identity. The relative openness of Japanese youth to gender-neutral names and names associated with the opposite gender suggests that naming practices are evolving alongside broader cultural changes. The adaptability of feminine traits in naming trends further illustrates how masculinity and femininity are being reshaped in Japanese society.

From an onomastic perspective, these trends highlight that naming conventions are not static but evolve in response to cultural shifts. The increasing use of gender-neutral names reflects changing understandings of gender, with naming practices both mirroring and potentially influencing societal perceptions. Additionally, people's familiarity with certain names and their social exposure to them influence how these names are perceived, illustrating the dynamic interplay between personal experience and broader linguistic norms.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, our survey was conducted with participants from urban areas. Although approximately 90% of the Japanese population resides in urban regions (The World Bank n.d.), future research should explore whether similar patterns exist among youths from more rural or potentially less connected areas. Second, our study did not include female participants from single-gender schools. While our results suggest differences in name perceptions between boys from single-gender and mixed-gender environments, we cannot make the same claim for girls without further investigation. A larger survey encompassing more schools would be needed to determine whether a consistent pattern exists among students from these different environments.

During the analysis, new questions emerged, suggesting directions for further research. This study focused on the phonological form of names, which serves different functions than the written form. Since gender misidentification often occurs based on the graphic representation of names, particularly in contexts where the name bearer is not present, future research could examine whether similar patterns hold for written names. Additionally, explorations of generational differences in naming perception—including how different age groups perceive traditional male and female names—could provide insight into shifting attitudes toward gender in naming. Lastly, while our study focused on Japanese youth, cross-cultural comparisons would offer a deeper understanding of how naming conventions interact with cultural attitudes toward gender.

Conclusion

Contemporary Japanese names manifest a broader variety of gender expression than names of older generations. Gender-neutral names are promoted in the media as fresh and trendy, and have become increasingly popular among parents. Our study contributes to the understanding of gender-neutral naming trends in contemporary Japan, a phenomenon observed in other places including the United States (Cohen 2023), by offering insights into how a younger generation, more exposed to these names than older generations, perceives names in relation to gender. New trends emerge and fade, with their lifespan largely determined by how well they are received. The evolving preferences for gender expression in names are closely linked to broader shifts in gender relations and identities. The findings, based on a survey among Japanese senior high school students, suggest that Japanese youth, particularly girls, generally view gender-neutral names positively and are open to names more strongly associated with the opposite gender. While this pattern aligns with earlier research in other countries, an important finding is that boys also show a relative openness to such names. This receptiveness may influence future naming practices and, more broadly, how gender identities evolve in Japan.

These findings have practical implications for naming practices in educational and social contexts. In schools, greater awareness of these shifting perceptions may encourage more inclusive approaches to addressing students, such as reconsidering gendered honorifics or adapting policies related to name usage. The spread of more gender-neutral language, such as the use of *-san* instead of gendered suffixes when addressing or referring to students, can help reduce gender misidentification (Barešová et al. 2025). Beyond schools, the growing preference for gender-neutral names and their positive reception may further influence parental naming choices and contribute to broader discussions on gender inclusivity in Japanese society.

Notes

¹ Adapted Chinese characters used in writing Japanese.

² The selection of kanji approved for use in names has been changing. Since the most recent expansion in 2017, the list includes 2,999 characters.

³ An inattentive or meaningless entry was defined as a response to the questionnaire that met at least one of the following criteria: (a) more than twelve out of fifteen names received identical responses, or (b) the respondent provided repeated, highly improbable answer combinations (e.g., rating a name as uniquely masculine but simultaneously considering it unnatural for a man).

⁴ This research was approved by the Research Ethics Panel of the Faculty of Arts at Palacký University Olomouc (Ref. No.: o8_2022).

⁵ “Baby Calendar”, Accessed September 5, 2024. <https://baby-calendar.jp/nazuke/>

⁶ “Baby Calendar”, Accessed September 5, 2024. <https://baby-calendar.jp/static/about>

⁷ The F-ratio indicates the proportion of individuals with a given name who are female. It is calculated by dividing the number of females with the name by the total number of both males and females with that name, using the formula: $F/(M+F)$.

⁸ One of the two Japanese phonographic syllabaries. It was chosen to write the names because it is commonly used to represent the pronunciation of words written in kanji.

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No AI Tools or Technology were used to conduct the research or write this article.

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