



# The Masturbation Article Affair: Japanese Manga, Scholarly Publishing, and the Twenty-First Century Politics of Censorship

Casey Brienza<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In April 2022, a first-year PhD student published his first peer-reviewed article in the journal *Qualitative Research*. Less than four months later, amid viral public outrage, that article, Karl Andersson's "I am not alone – we are *all* alone: Using masturbation as an ethnographic method in research on *shota* subculture in Japan," was removed from publication and formally retracted by the Journal Editors. This paper explores the controversy surrounding the so-called "masturbation article" and its relevance to the field of publishing studies. I begin with a general overview of the shota manga genre and its legal context and provide a factual short history of the affair. I then demonstrate what a good-faith positive peer review of Andersson's article may have included and critically assess *Qualitative Research*'s Retraction Notice, alongside other published ethical complaints. I conclude by showing how both Andersson's article and the Japanese manga he studies have been censored for the same reasons, with troubling implications for freedom of speech in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords** Comic books · Obscenity · Publishing ethics · Scholarly journal publishing · Shotacon

## Introduction

On the morning of August 10, 2022, a longtime friend contacted me out of the blue via a direct message on Twitter: "Have you seen this qual[itative] article about masturbation?!" No, I had not seen the article. And further, because my friend had provided no link to the article in question, I was thoroughly baffled—why would I, with no particular interest in the study of sexualities or the body, be the person to ask about it? A search on Twitter for "masturbation article," however, netted an

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✉ Casey Brienza  
casey.brienza@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> New York, NY, USA

immediate top-level result, and when I actually saw the article’s title and read its abstract I understood exactly why my friend had wanted my opinion: While it might have been the “masturbation article” in the sense that its research method was masturbation, the article’s substantive research *subject* was, in fact, Japanese manga.

Specifically, the article’s research subject was a niche genre of Japanese manga featuring drawn images of young boys, often in sexually explicit situations, which article author Karl Andersson, a first-year PhD student at the University of Manchester in the UK, refers to throughout the article text as “shota.” Published online first on April 26, 2022 by the SAGE journal *Qualitative Research*, “I am not alone – we are *all* alone: Using masturbation as an ethnographic method in research on shota subculture in Japan” argued for the value of a novel research method which seeks to understand the culture of shota manga producers and consumers by reading their comic books in the same way Japanese readers themselves do—while masturbating [1]. Masturbation as an ethnographic research method is, unsurprisingly, controversial, but even more controversial in this particular case is Andersson’s use of shota manga in his research. The article went viral online on August 8, resulting in salacious coverage by UK media outlets and public condemnations from a variety of academic and non-academic perspectives. By August 22, a mere two weeks later, the article had been removed from *Qualitative Research*’s website and formally retracted [2]. Andersson himself, meanwhile, was reported to be under police investigation and suspended from his university [3].

What is really going on here, and why does it matter? In this paper, I draw upon my background as a qualitative sociologist with substantive subject matter expertise in both manga and academic publishing to explore the answers to these questions and their relevance to the field of publishing studies. I begin with a general overview of the shota manga genre and its legal context and provide a factual short history of the affair. I then demonstrate what a good-faith positive peer review of Andersson’s article may have included and critically assess *Qualitative Research*’s Retraction Notice, and its unusual decision to remove the text of the article from its website altogether, alongside other published ethical complaints. I conclude by showing how both Andersson’s article *and* the Japanese manga he studies have been censored for the same reasons. On the whole, this affair points to a chilled climate for academic freedom where certain subjects—of particular importance to publishing scholars and practitioners—are functionally off-limits to discussion and debate, the implications of which should trouble anyone who cares about free speech in the twenty-first century.

## **Shotacon and the Legal Context of Manga**

Before proceeding with the specifics of the masturbation article affair, it is important to understand what is meant by “shota” specifically, as well as the complex legal context of manga generally. Shota, or shotacon, is a niche genre of Japanese manga focusing on homoerotic depictions of young boys, often (but not necessarily)

in sexually explicit situations with either other young boys or older men.<sup>1</sup> The producers and consumers of shotacon include both men and women. Japanese manga genres are, as a general rule, nominally segregated by gender [4], so shotacon is unusual in that the intended audience may be both male and female. Shotacon is short for “Shotarou Complex,” itself a twist on lolicon (short for “Lolita Complex”), a similar but far more popular and internationally recognized genre aimed at men which sexualizes young girls [5]. Shotacon first emerged during the 1990s in Japan’s self-published fanzine, or doujinshi, culture as an offshoot of yaoi, a transformative parody genre of male homoerotic romance by and for women most similar to slash fanfiction in the West [6]. Amateur original works were also published, and several small manga publishers were quick to jump onto the bandwagon and commission yet more original shota content. Many of the early artists publishing and self-publishing shotacon were women; some male artists crossed over from erotic comics, or eromanga, intended for men to publish shota for women-oriented boys’ love (BL)<sup>2</sup> imprints as well.

In Japan today, shota is not illegal, though its sale and distribution may be legally restricted [7]. And while self-publishing doujinshi under pennames is *de rigueur*, many of these pennames are lightly worn and also used in professional contexts. In fact, self-publishing erotic manga—including shotacon—is one of the few recognized pathways into a professional artistic career in the manga industry, and drawing manga professionally is one of the few avenues of sustainable self-employment available to Japanese women [8]. Several Japanese manga artists known for shota, such as Maki Murakami, Aoi Futaba & Kurenai Mitsuba, and Mako Takahashi, all of them women, have even been legally published in English translation in the United States. During the American manga boom of the early 2000s [9], their books were widely available and could be found on the shelves of chain bookstores throughout the nation. Since most manga, these titles in translation included, consist of line drawings in black and white, their exaggerated, cartoonish characters would never be mistaken for realistic, let alone *real*, depictions of human beings. Nevertheless, while these manga were not necessarily shotacon proper, and American publishers will “age up” characters in their translations in order to preempt and deflect criticism [10], their styles showed traces of shotacon’s influence.

The above issues—particularly in relation to gender, career pathways, and books already available to Anglophone audiences—are important to bear in mind when considering manga in relation to the law outside of Japan. To my knowledge, no one has ever been criminally charged for shota manga specifically. Lolicon, however, its better-known counterpart, is a different story. In the United States, for example, “[m]anga is typically prosecuted under provisions of either local obscenity law, local child pornography laws, local harmful to minors laws, or the PROTECT Act” [11]. The PROTECT Act criminalizes obscene depictions of sex involving minors, including drawn images. To be considered “obscene,” a “work must be proved in

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, “shota” and “shotacon” are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> In these contexts, shotacon may be thought of as a subgenre of boys’ love (BL). For more on BL manga, see for example Levi et al. [6], McLelland et al. [43], and Welker [44].

court to be patently offensive, possess no serious literary, artistic or scientific value, and appeal to the prurient interest (arouse the reader). To be harmful to minors it must meet the above test, but as to minors” [11]. In 2010, manga collector Christopher Handley was charged under the PROTECT Act, pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to six months in prison [12], and in 2013, Christjen Bee, also charged under the PROTECT Act, took a plea agreement and was sentenced to three years without parole in federal prison [13]. The current legal situation is similar, and even more unambiguous, in the UK. In 2014, Robul Hoque was convicted under Sect. 62(1) of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, which prohibits images of sexual conduct by persons under the age of 18, including drawn images such as manga, for possessing child pornography in the form of anime- and manga-style images [14].

Of course, no real children are directly harmed in the production or consumption of these comic books, and neither shotacon nor lolicon would ever be mistaken for realistically-imagined representations of children, never mind *actual* children. Japanese comics and animation have their own particular visual conventions, and people who are unfamiliar with them often have trouble accurately identifying the intended age, race/ethnicity, and even gender of the characters [4]. There is, on the one hand, no guarantee law enforcement authorities would even be able to recognize shotacon or lolicon amid a plethora of other eromanga genres. And on the other hand, countless examples of other genres of manga, such as boys’ love, also depict characters under the age of 18, e.g. high school students, in explicit sexual situations and therefore run afoul of obscenity laws [15]. I am aware personally of situations where lawyers representing defendants charged with possessing manga have had to bring in outside experts to offer an opinion on whether or not any of the suspected images are meant to represent children—because they honestly do not know! The bottom line, however, is that, due to visual conventions which do not automatically translate across cultures, *any* sexually explicit manga could be made criminally suspect, and the mere possession of many types of manga, including but not limited to shota, could be considered a crime in countries such as the US and the UK.

## A Short History of the Masturbation Article Affair

The affair began on the morning of August 8, 2022, approximately three months after Andersson’s article was first published, with a tweet from Alice Sullivan, gender-critical feminist and Professor of Sociology at University College London: “Not just a PhD in wanking, but a peer-reviewed paper on masturbating to images of young boys. Published in ‘Qualitative Methods’” [16]. That same afternoon, her tweet was posted to the “Feminism: Sex & gender discussions” topic of the *Mumsnet*, a social site for London-based mothers, where the typical reaction was shocked outrage and disgust [17]. On August 9, *Qualitative Research* announced an investigation into the article and the circumstances of its publication, presumably due to complaints to the Editors [18]. The announcement affirmed their intent to follow Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) guidelines. Sullivan’s tweet was also circulating through outline networks of American sociologists attending the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, who reacted to the article first

with amusement and later with growing concern about the article's academic rigor and lack of sensitivity to issues of race and sexuality [19]. On August 10, Andersson's article was written up by the *Daily Mail* [20] and condemned by British Conservative MP Neil O'Brien, who tweeted, "Why should hard-working taxpayers in my constituency have to pay for an academic to write about his experiences masturbating to Japanese porn?" [21]. In subsequent days, the University of Manchester received Freedom of Information Act requests pertaining to Andersson [22], and other (especially UK-based) journalistic outlets such as *The Guardian* [23], *Metro* [24], *The Daily Telegraph* [25], and *Vice* [19] picked up the story, digging further into Andersson's public record and discovering a past history of provocative magazine self-publishing demonstrating prior interest in the sexualization of underage boys. Higher education-focused journalistic outlets *Times Higher Education* [26–29] and *Inside Higher Ed* [18] also covered the story. Andersson's article was removed from SAGE's website at the end of the first week, a few days after the affair began, with the Removal Notice citing "ethical concerns" and "social harm being caused by the publication of this work" [2, p. 3]. The Removal Notice again reaffirmed the Journal Editors' commitment to following COPE guidelines. The final Retraction Notice for Andersson's article was published online on August 22, 2022, two weeks after the journal first announced its investigation, again citing "ethical issues surrounding the conception and design [of the article's research]" [2, p. 2] and "the potential to cause significant harm" [2, p. 1]. That same day, the University of Manchester released a statement announcing that Andersson himself was suspended from the university pending further investigation and was currently being investigated by the Greater Manchester Police [3].

## What Would a Positive Assessment Look Like?

Notable in the above account of the history of the affair is the absence of voices in support of Andersson's article. Yet, by inference, this support must have existed in the first instance, at an absolute minimum in the form of two anonymous peer-reviewers whose reports led to the editorial decision to publish the article. That the reviewers have not voluntarily de-anonymized themselves is understandable; they risk reputational damage and guilt by mere association. However, in order to fully understand the affair, it is important to understand what the arguments in favor of the article are and might have been. To this end, therefore, I will demonstrate what a good-faith positive peer review of Andersson's article could include. Specifically, I will cover the following, in order, 1) the suitability of the article's form and writing style, 2) the overall merit of the article's central idea and argument, 3) suggestions to the author for improvement, and 4) a final recommendation to/not to publish, along with additional considerations for the journal editor(s) to consider.

To be clear: I did not referee Andersson's article, and I do not know who did. What I *do* have are the sort of credentials that would seem to qualify me as a plausible peer-reviewer of the article. I am a qualitative sociologist with a record of peer-reviewed academic monograph and journal article publications related to Japanese manga. I am a woman of East Asian ancestry. I also have experience working and

studying in UK academia. These are the perspectives I will use to evaluate the article and assess its potential contribution to knowledge in the field.

## Form and Writing Style

Andersson's article is written in what the author himself acknowledges is a "rather casual and hands-on way" [1, p. 3] that, at times, seems to stray into outright vulgarity. For example, in describing the sorts of storylines most frequently encountered in shota manga, he explains that "often, very young boy characters would greedily jump over the first cock that presented itself" [1, p. 7]. Excerpts quoted from his fieldnotes are also frankly sexual. I would not normally consider this style of writing to be suitable vernacular for a scholarly journal article. *However*, by *Qualitative Research*'s own definition, Andersson's article is not actually an "Article,"; it is, in fact, a "Note."<sup>3</sup> According to the journal's online submission guidelines:

Notes is a new format for short, engaging and imaginative submissions. It offers a more playful space for critical reflection on the craft of qualitative research. Authors are encouraged to experiment with styles of writing, and submissions can take the form of stories, anecdotes, or lessons that impart original methodological insights. Submissions should be between 2,000 and 4,000 words, excluding references. [30]

In light of these guidelines, then, which encourage "imaginative," "playful" submissions that "experiment with styles of writing," the author's choice of vernacular would seem less inappropriate, and I am willing to concede that a forthright vernacular style when writing about sex-related matters is a valid stylistic choice. His use of first person likewise underscores the anecdotal, storytelling aspects of the article, also in line with the guidelines for Notes. I therefore have no particular qualms about form or writing style in this instance.

## Central Idea and Argument

The central idea and *raison d'être* of the article—that masturbation may be used by a researcher to understand erotic texts such as shota manga and the cultures from whence they originate—is, in my view, its greatest strength. Proposing to use these texts as their readers do, and as their creators doubtless intended, is at once entirely novel and entirely obvious. Erotica is pervasive across all forms of contemporary media, after all; romance is one of the most popular categories of books and the most profitable [31], for example, and masturbation has been associated with reading (and particularly women's reading) for hundreds of years [32]. Some of the most famous ethnographies of readers focus on erotica in various forms, including Janice

<sup>3</sup> I use the term "article" (uncapitalized) throughout this paper to refer to what is properly termed a Note. Further, although it is nowhere stated in the submission guidelines that Notes are peer-reviewed, both the Acknowledgements section of Andersson's article and the subsequent Retraction Notice make it clear that this particular Note, at least, was fully peer-reviewed.

Radway's *Reading the Romance* (romance novels) [33] and Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (slash fanfiction) [34], and Andersson makes a genuine, original methodological contribution to this literature that could potentially be applied to a wide variety of other media forms and genres. I consider this aspect of his article quite impressive.

I am less impressed by the subject matter-related conclusion he draws from this research. The twin arguments as encapsulated in the article title—that solo masturbation can connect people with one another, while sex with other people can be lonely—are not new insights. All media, and not just manga, are social [35], and an unfulfilled yearning to bridge the unbridgeable gaps between human beings is always a feature of mediated communication [36]. However, as these arguments are secondary to the article's primary *raison d'être*, I do not consider this an irredeemable flaw.

### Suggestions for Improvement

There are three discrete areas that, as a peer-reviewer, I would suggest might be improved. First, I would suggest the author include more Japanese otaku theory [37], particularly with reference to claims that sexual attraction to cartoons is not the same as sexual attraction to real people and that the consumption of erotic manga may, in some instances, be an active, conscious rejection of sexual relationships with real people. In his article, Andersson does note that “readers’ views on whether or how sexual desire for fictional boys is connected to sexual attraction to actual children” [1, p. 2] vary but offers no additional detail; he should expand on this. Second, I would suggest that he provide a complete bibliographical list of the books he used for his research. Many different kinds of manga might be labeled shotacon, and his list would allow readers to check the substantive validity of his research and help them to see how Andersson himself understands the shota genre. Are the books professionally published or self-published? Are they yaoi or original stories? How many of the creators are men? How many are women? As I discussed previously, self-published artists can cross over into other genres and even attain professional careers; a bibliography would also place his research in the wider manga publishing context. Third, I would suggest that he write a bit more about himself. Specifically, how did he become interested in such a niche topic, and how does his interest relate to his own life story? This would help to situate him in his field and his personal stake in it. It would also help the reader to understand why he considers shota to be an important subject of research.

### Final Recommendation and Additional Considerations

Given the strength and, I daresay, innovation of the article's central idea, and that I have no major complaints about the basic research design and process, I would recommend conditional acceptance, subject to the author addressing those areas where I suggested improvement. This would be at the discretion of the editor(s), but I would happily review the revised article as well. I certainly would ask the editorial

team, perhaps informally via email, if they are aware that shota manga is illegal in the UK, but given that I do not personally endorse the criminalization of cartoon images and consider such laws which target people who have never harmed real children to be unjust on principle, I do not regard that fact alone as reason not to publish. I would not flag any other ethical considerations.<sup>4</sup>

## Retraction Notice and Other Ethical Criticisms

My concern about shota manga's legal status was not, at least on its face, the concern which dominated *Qualitative Research*'s Retraction Notice, however. COPE guidelines for article retractions state that “[r]etraction notices should mention the reasons and basis for the retraction to enable readers to understand why the article is unreliable and should also specify who is retracting the article and possibly how the matter came to the journal's attention (claimants may be named only when they have given permission)” [38, p. 4]. Further, the guidelines specify that the original articles should not be removed from publication except in “extremely limited cases [...] such as when the article is clearly defamatory, violates personal privacy, is the subject of a court order, or might pose a serious health risk to the general public” [38, p. 5]. The retraction of Andersson's article and its permanent removal from the journal's website, therefore, suggests extraordinary circumstances.

What, then, are those extraordinary circumstances as the Journal Editors conceive them? The Retraction Notice points to “ethical issues surrounding the conception and design” [2, p. 2] of the article's research, which, by implication, did not take into consideration “unintended consequences” in relation to the potential harm it might cause [2, p. 1]. Andersson's article, the Journal Editors contend, “legitimizes sexual activity involving graphic illustrated images of children and young people, both as an activity in itself and as a research method” and “such arguments make the note highly problematic due to the potential to cause significant harm” [2, p. 1]. The word “harm” occurs three times in the Retraction Notice, and the removal of the article and its subsequent retraction both rest upon this central claim of “significant harm.”

This is a serious allegation, but it is not supported by any evidence of actual harm to any individual or group in the Retraction Notice, or by any evidence that similar papers have caused concrete harms in the past. The Retraction Notice does not, in fact, even specify *who* is or might be harmed by the article or, for that matter, *what kind* of harm is implied.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I regard the question of who is or might be harmed by this article to be critical. I will therefore explore some of the possibilities, drawing upon the higher education subject area journalistic press for inspiration as

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<sup>4</sup> In their Retraction Notice, the Journal Editors state that the article's two peer-reviewers did not flag any ethical considerations.

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of “harm” here encompasses serious bodily injury/death and criminal activity only. For the purposes of this exercise, I am not interested in harms involving reputational damage or purely emotional distress.

applicable. To this end, I have identified four potential groups who might conceivably be harmed by Andersson's research: (1) other researchers, (2) people of Japanese and East Asian descent, (3) LGBTQ+ -identified individuals, and (4) children. I will consider each of these—and the plausibility of claims of harm to them—in turn.

### Other Researchers

The first group who might potentially be harmed by Andersson's article consists of researchers who are or might be inclined to build upon substantively upon its research on shotacon. As noted previously, merely possessing shotacon (including for research purposes) could be illegal in the UK and other countries, and attempting to replicate Andersson's research method outside of Japan could place the researcher who does so in legal jeopardy. Mere publication of original shota-related research could be seen as potential evidence of a crime and/or put the researcher under suspicion of having harmed real children, purely by dint of interest in fictional subject matter. Unfortunately, COPE has no clear guidelines on the publication of research involving illegal activities [39], and there are any number of hypothetical important research topics which involve activities perfectly legal in some countries but unequivocally illegal in others. That shota exists in this ambiguous space between legal and illegal activity would only seem to underscore its importance as an internationally relevant research topic, and with English as the de facto global language of the academy, English-language journals cannot be assumed to cater to only a single nationality of writer or reader. Further, censoring Andersson's article because other researchers might be encouraged to act irresponsibly seems overly condescending where an appended editorial warning might suffice.

### People of Japanese and East Asian Descent

Another group—or, rather, constellation of groups—who might potentially be harmed are people of Japanese and East Asian descent. Construed most narrowly, this includes Japanese shota fans, the people whom Andersson purports to study, and in the widest of senses may be extended to all people of East Asian descent. As Erica Kanesaka, an assistant professor of English at Emory University who studies race, sex and gender in Japan and the US explained to *Inside Higher Ed*, “The article reflects longstanding Orientalist attitudes related to Japan’s infantilization and hypersexualization in the Western imagination” [18] and, by implication, feeding such pernicious stereotypes can, in the worst circumstances, result in actual violence against individuals of Asian descent. According to Elizabeth Chin, professor of media design practices and at ArtCenter College of Design in California and editor in chief of *American Anthropologist*, these problems are exacerbated because Andersson is “white guy doing work among Japanese” and there is “no dearth of research on the ways in which Asian sexualities have been constructed as subordinate, consumable, et cetera, by whiteness writ large” [18].

Of course, concrete evidence of harm is lacking, and I am not entirely persuaded, furthermore, that either of these issues are uniquely disqualifying. Is Andersson infantilizing or sexually objectifying Japanese people if he attempts to use their comic books in the same way “almost all” [1, p. 2] of his informants tell him they do themselves, i.e. to read them while masturbating? Taking shotacon out of its cultural context and applying, say, a serious literary analysis to representative genre texts is arguably more objectifying. Further, I would not regard Andersson’s race, gender, and sexuality to be facially noteworthy. Most Western scholars of anime and manga are white, and of these, the most prominent tend to be white *men*. The most prominent scholars specifically of BL manga, furthermore, tend to be white *gay men*. In studying shotacon, therefore, Andersson’s identity as a white gay man is not exceptional, and I am not surprised that he does not interrogate his own position at length. By way of comparison, Andersson’s own PhD supervisor Sharon Kinsella says little about being “young, white, female” in the book based on her PhD thesis besides noting that some of her fieldwork informants tried to drunkenly hit on her [40]. As William Matthews points out, such criticisms implicate the entire academic field and several successive generations of academic luminaries [29]. Although, as indicated in the previous section, I do think some additional reflexivity on Andersson’s part is warranted in his article, punishing a first-year PhD student like Andersson for such longstanding issues pervasive throughout the academy by retracting an already-published article is, in my view, pure scapegoating.

### **LGBTQ +-identified Individuals**

Relatedly, and given the sexuality of the author and the nature of his research’s subject matter, the masturbation article affair could be seen to feed into pernicious stereotypes about gay men as pedophiles and child groomers, fueling violence and hate crimes against LGBTQ +-identified individuals. This variety of ethical criticism takes a particularly conspiratorial turn in the journalistic press coverage amid unsubstantiated suspicions of bad faith in relation to Andersson’s public biography and past history in magazine self-publishing, implying that he might have an ulterior motive for researching shota—namely, some dark and sinister agenda to effect societal change that ultimately decriminalizes sex between adults and minors. Alice Sullivan, for example, complained to *Times Higher Education* that his article normalizes pedophilia [26]. As I am not personally acquainted with the author and have no privileged knowledge of his motivations, I cannot comment on bad faith allegations.<sup>6</sup> And in any event, no clear evidence of concrete harms caused by the article (or similar papers) to LGBTQ + groups has been cited, nor has any criminal wrongdoing on Andersson’s own part, as his article was retracted while a police investigation was

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<sup>6</sup> Some of Andersson’s critics, for example Alice Sullivan, who kicked off the whole affair with her tweet, might also be subjected to unsubstantiated accusations of bad faith motivation. Sullivan’s public and publication record evinces controversial sympathies to gender-critical feminism, which is associated with anti-LGBTQ + hate [45]. It has even been regarded, at its most extreme, as a stalking horse for fascism and fascist right-wing politics [46, 47].

still ongoing. However, I do not and cannot support the principle that certain types of people must not research certain topics, simply because someone get the wrong idea if they do. This, in my view, is a basic issue of academic freedom.

## **Children**

And finally, there are children—real children, not cartoon children—to be considered. Does this article truly harm actual children by normalizing pedophilia and, by implication, encourage adults to sexually assault minors? No one really knows, but the answer is probably not a straightforward yes. That no criticism of Andersson's article, either in the journalistic press or *Qualitative Research's* Retraction Notice, is able to draw a clear positive empirical link between shotacon (or any other patently unrealistic, drawn images) and actual child sexual abuse is in itself telling, however—because, quite simply, such a link has never been found. Some research would, in fact, suggest the opposite: The availability of such material might provide pedophiles with a safe outlet for their sexual desires and thus prevent them from harming real children [41]. Although on its face children are the most plausible group harmed by the publication of Andersson's article, it is, in the end, a good story that exercises the emotions but falls apart when subjected to scrutiny.

## **New Frontiers for Censorship**

As shown in the previous section, there is little direct evidence of actual harm to any group which would support the retraction and removal of Andersson's article. But there is another frame through which to view this affair, as Deborah Poff, past chair and trustee of COPE, when asked by *Inside Higher Ed* “about ethical issues that might be relevant,” makes abundantly clear. In an emailed statement, she notes that COPE

has a subcommittee right now looking at editorial responsibility with respect to topics or issues which people might consider offensive, discriminatory, etc. Unfortunately we haven't drafted any guidelines on this yet. There have been a few well known cases where articles published were challenged as requiring retractions by editors because they were sexist, racist, sexually offensive, etc. [18]

In other words, Andersson's article may in fact have been retracted and removed, not for its potential to cause significant harm, an argument of dubious merit at best, but rather because it was judged to be offensive. One unnamed academic told *Times Higher Education* bluntly that it was the “most morally offensive paper I have ever read” [26]. As a matter of fact, one might even say that was judged to be obscene. Consider again the PROTECT Act's definition of obscenity: To be obscene, a work must be “patently offensive, possess no serious literary, artistic or scientific value, and appeal to the prurient interest” [11]. As I have already demonstrated, each of these three criteria has been used to criticize the article at

various stages. It has been called offensive; its research conception and design are accused of being unethical; and it uses vulgar, provocative language. And because the manga in question being researched is shotacon, the article also “pertains to (drawn images of) minors” [11]. But because COPE has no guidelines for the retraction of “offensive” material, and the Journal Editors stated publicly on more than one occasion their intention follow COPE guidelines, someone feeling offended could not be used as a basis for the retraction of Andersson’s article. So instead, the Journal Editors rested the case for retraction on unproven claims of harm to unspecified individuals or groups.

The wider implications of this cannot be understated: *A peer-reviewed journal article has been censored for precisely the same reason the comic books it studies have also been censored—for obscenity—and because some people are willing to claim, without any hard evidence to support the substance of their beliefs, that the mere existence of this material is harmful to society.* Although there are scattered reports of publishers censoring potentially problematic manga-related academic content prior to publication [42], this is the first time a scholarly journal article on Japanese manga has been retracted, taken down, and effectively censored post-publication in response to viral public outcry.

The irony, of course, in SAGE’s and *Qualitative Research*’s desire to censor and remove Andersson’s article from the public sphere is that they will not be able to do so, either practically *or* legally. Firstly, the appearance of censorship only increases appetite for the censored material in question. Secondly, the article was first published under a Creative Commons CC-BY license, waiving all copyright protections except attribution, which means the article can be redistributed and republished almost without limitation. Infinite copies of the article may even be sold for profit, with no monies remitted to either SAGE or the author. COPE guidelines for article retractions state that a Retraction Notice should be attached to all online versions of the retracted article text [38]; taking down a CC-BY licensed article 3 + months after first publication even before it was formally retracted ensures that this will be virtually impossible in practice.

Regardless of the *actual* availability of the article going forward, however, the masturbation article affair is sure to set a chilling precedent for both researchers who might wish to study manga, shotacon or otherwise, and academic publishers who might be interested in giving their research a platform. As previously noted, people unfamiliar with the medium often have difficulty accurately identifying the intended age, race/ethnicity, and/or gender of characters—rendering *any* sexually explicit manga content potentially suspect. Irrespective of the intellectual merits of such a publication—and even for Andersson’s article there are good-faith arguments in favor of its value, as I have shown—who would want this kind of hassle? Who would welcome being hounded online and targeted by the police? Through criminalization of the basic materials of research, the comic books themselves, and proven threats to censor any research outputs based upon those comic books, the apparent lessons of the affair seem certain to stifle future scholarship and innovation. And they also point to the real risks borne by publishers and distributors of manga outside of Japan, who could easily fall under the same varieties of suspicion. Even scholars such as myself who are not willing

to unconditionally condemn Andersson's article may be opening ourselves up to attack. Most serious of all, though, are the troubling implications for freedom of speech in the twenty-first century: a world where some comic books are illegal and so politically incendiary that researching and writing about them is effectively prohibited too.

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