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**Counterflow and Cultural Exchange via Global
Television:
Netflix Japan's Novel Takes on Reality Dating
Programs**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Netflix Japan's content production strategy through two created-for-Japan Netflix-produced programs, *Terrace House* and *The Boyfriend*. Both shows are uniquely Japanese takes on the traditional reality television format, and one is an open adaptation and queering of the other's original format; their intentional way of going against the established grain of the reality-romance genre has created massive appeal in the West and internationally. This paper shows how both programs' international success fits into modern understandings of global media flows (especially that of periphery-core counterflows). This work further suggests that the role of international content distributors (such as Netflix) in creating cultural exchange is becoming increasingly realized in a digital world.

Keywords: global media flows, Japanese queer culture, Netflix, queer reality television, Japanese reality television

Introduction

This paper analyzes Netflix's strategy of producing original programs appealing to global audiences by examining the cases of *Terrace House* and *The Boyfriend*, two Japanese programs acclaimed for being fresh iterations on the traditional reality-dating television format. *Terrace House* is a reality-romance program that diverts strongly from Western norms of reality television: there are no "talking head" producer interviews, no scheduled activities for participants, and participants can come, go, and permanently leave as they wish. *The Boyfriend* follows up on *Terrace House* as an unabashed "queering" of the format, as it is Japan's first gay dating program – it takes slightly more inspiration from Western reality television, but by and large caters to *Terrace House*'s fans through its similar shared-house concept, focus on friendship and romance, and *tarento* discussion panel.

This paper contains information on the Japanese streaming platform market and how it shaped Netflix Japan's corporate strategy – though Netflix faced (predicted) difficulties early on with a perceived lack of domestic content, it eventually found domestic popularity through creating Japanese-language Netflix Original programs, some of which were co-produced with traditional television networks. *Terrace House* was a program meant for a Japanese audience, but it gained international allure because of how different it was to traditional Western reality television – its calm depiction of the everyday life of everyday people appealed to those used to reality television's over-the-top hysterics, mean-spiritedness, and vulgarity. *The Boyfriend* followed in *Terrace House*'s legacy as a program seeking to show the everyday lives of Japanese gay men in a calm, understated way, even in a culture where gay marriage still remains impermissible.

This paper argues that the success of *Terrace House* and *The Boyfriend* as non-Western Netflix-produced programs suggests that global media flows no longer simply go from the cores (the West) to the peripheries (the East and Global South). It introduces the idea of contraflows and periphery-core contraflows, as seen with *Terrace House* and *The Boyfriend*. In arguing that these are examples of “reversing of the flows,” this paper proposes that Netflix has added to cultural exchange in television, putting the company one step further on its journey to becoming a global television network. This paper advances understanding of global media through examining Netflix’s role in aiding positive international cultural exchange through media creation and distribution.

Market Analysis – Japan

Japan is a country that is embedded in technology; its popular image is that it is one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world. Japan has the backing of a vibrant youth culture that uses internet and mobile devices to consume media in ways that would be difficult to do in years prior, as evidenced by an internet penetration rate of 87% in 2023 (World Bank Group, n.d.). A high internet usage rate, combined with the nascent popularity of user-generated content streaming services such as YouTube and NicoNicoDouga, gives the sense that it is no wonder that Netflix’s entry into the Japanese market in 2015 eventually culminated in great success cementing the platform as a media giant in the country. However, there were originally questions about the efficacy of such a move, as Netflix Japan (JP) had a slow start. Thomas Baudinette (2017) of the Global Internet TV Consortium observed at the time that “Netflix does not align well with audience expectations and viewing habits in Japan,” additionally noting that the streaming market in Japan was already saturated. Lobato (2019) concurred, additionally saying that Japan is host to an “ultracompetitive... streaming market,” also calling Japan

“wealthy” and “media-saturated” (p. 126). Nevertheless, Netflix JP persisted – what was once “a brand with zero presence” became “a key, noisy player in the local streaming ecosystem” (Merican, 2025) with over 10 million subscribers, an amount that has “doubled in the last four years [since 2020]” (Nussey, 2024).

Netflix JP’s impressive number of 40% domestic content at launch “was not enough for Japanese audiences” (Lobato, 2019, p. 127), and Netflix JP had difficulty licensing popular programs whose networks were tied to previously established streaming services. With the option of licensing more domestic content seemingly out of reach, Netflix JP turned to creating and co-commissioning (partnering with broadcast networks) original shows – the two shows that will be explored in this essay, *Terrace House: Opening New Doors* and *The Boyfriend*, are examples of both. Presently, Netflix in Japan has enjoyed immense success in the ten years since its entry into the country and has been bolstered by its high amount of domestic content – only two shows in the Top 10 rankings for the month of November 2025 were foreign. This has had a global impact on Japanese soft power production and Netflix’s overall success as well: “More than 120 Japanese titles have entered the global non-English Top 10 ranking” (Merican, 2025). Netflix co-CEO Greg Peters has said that “From 2021 to 2024 alone, Netflix’s investment in Japan generated an economic impact ... of more than ¥450B [\$3B],” also calling Japan “an indispensable market for Netflix” (Merican, 2025).

Background

Western reality television has earned a negative reputation over the years since its inception around the turn of the millennium. What was originally derided as “Trash TV” (Nweke, 2023, p. 2,126) – while not completely shaking off the negative stigma of being low-quality or needlessly dramatic– has transformed from its earlier years into a staying phenomenon

that has changed the landscape of television at large. Holmes and Jermyn (2004) suggest that Western reality television typically constitutes programming that is observational in nature (oftentimes being filmed like documentary programs) but includes “display and performance” (p. 5). This programming typically focuses on seemingly average people (who could, in theory, be replaced by those watching on the couch, and vice versa), which creates a contrived “manipulation of ‘the real’” through blurring lines between manufactured drama and real events (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, pp. 8, 11). Friedman (2002) describes this manipulation as “television programming as a representation of reality” (p. 7), and that sense of false reality has stuck with consumers of Western reality television for years, as general attitudes such as Patterson’s (2001) were, and still remain, common:

What the [US] networks dub reality TV comes at us with musical cues on the soundtrack, manipulative editing ... and ill-managed anger, all enacted by a cast of wannabe models, actors and game-show hosts. (p. 12)

Modern takes on reality television from the peripheries, on the other hand, tend to feel more honest and sincere to the West – without producer interference to create manufactured, angry storylines, and assisted by a heightened cultural emphasis on harmony and group dynamics, programs such as *Terrace House* and *The Boyfriend* carve out new possibilities for global reality television as a whole.

***Terrace House* – A Novel Take on the Reality Dating Format**

Terrace House: Opening New Doors (2017-2019) is the fourth series in the internationally popular *Terrace House* franchise, which ran as a whole from 2012 to 2020. *Terrace House* has received immense international acclaim for its unique, natural take on reality (dating) television, and *Opening New Doors* continues in this trend. *Opening New Doors* focuses

on the lives of six young people – three male and three female – who live in an opulent shared home. Both in and out of the home, their lives are chronicled – unlike shared-home contemporaries such as *Big Brother*, participants are not sheltered from the outside world. *Terrace House* twists major reality television norms in a multitude of ways, all of which give it a signature (and distinctive) laid-back, “slice-of-life” feeling – there is no producer interference, no interviews, no set time in which participants leave (most seasons air for a little longer than a year, but participants typically do not stick around that long) – in fact, participants are free to exit at any time, for any reason. These major changes make *Terrace House* a distinct product when compared to the vast majority of reality television programs. In the West, “audience skepticism about the authenticity of reality TV” (Hill, 2005, p. 457) is a given, and *Terrace House*’s lack of common elements that audiences begrudgingly expect from reality television add to its appeal.

As *Terrace House* is a so-called “show about nothing” (Nakaji Monnier, 2017), there is no set goal nor prize associated with participation: some seek romance, some friendship, and others simply fun. As participants get to know each other more, they may eventually advance their relationships – courtships and friendships alike are eagerly commented and speculated on by a cast of six commentators. This “panel format” is essentially unheard of in Western reality television, which tends to rely on “the medium’s infamous talking heads and voice-overs” (Deming, 2005, p. 131). The panel format seems to be a very recent development when applied to reality television, but Japan’s television landscape has long been dominated by variety programs in which a set cast provides commentary. Known as *tarento*, variety show reaction-stars can often be seen “smiling at the audience in a small superimposed frame, or sitting in a panel discussing the gossip of the day” – their ubiquitousness is so high that “Japanese television would be unthinkable without its tarento” (Kirsch, 2014, pp. 74,84). The tarento in *Opening New*

Doors act as quasi-hosts – while they have no interactions with the six participants, they act as a mediating force between them and the audience through their commentary, as if they are a built-in watch party.

An example of this is in *Opening New Doors*' second episode, where aspiring chef Yuudai (19) tries making a romantic move on university student and model Ami (20) by saying that he would write a recipe for her to cook, and watch her do so (without any teaching whatsoever). Ami later remarks to the other girls of the house, "I've never had someone be prickly with me ... he was sort of talking down to me," but decides to view their interaction charitably: "Maybe that's how he communicates" (Maeda, 2017). After another scene, the program cuts to the commentators, who go right into their reaction. Well aware – along with the viewers – of Yuudai and Ami's personalities frequently clashing, they express surprise at Ami's willingness to go along with Yuudai's brash approach, with panelist Yoshimi Tokui in particular saying, "Surprisingly, there's some possibility [of a budding romance]." In a typical reality dating show, there would likely be a cut to talking-head interviews of the two involved talking more directly about each other, but instead the panel is left to speculate on what the interaction might mean, and what it might hold for the future, just as a typical viewing audience would. This understated approach lessens the stakes of the drama – it feels likely that a typical reality show would have milked such an encounter for as long as they could – but somehow draws viewers in more: a hallmark of a show that "is closer to a nature documentary than to the exploitation films that one has come to expect from reality television" (Patterson, 2018).

The Boyfriend – Queering the Terrace House Format

The Boyfriend (2024) has the distinction of being Japan's first same-sex reality dating program – in most ways, it consciously follows in the footsteps of its predecessor *Terrace*

House, yet in other ways it sticks to its more outwardly dramatic contemporaries in the reality-romance television field. While certainly not a one-for-one reproduction, it could be looked at as a sort of “open adaptation” of the *Terrace House* format in the wake of its unfortunate cancellation, despite both productions originating in Japan. Its most basic premise – multiple young people seeking love and friendship living in a fancy shared house – mirrors *Terrace House*’s exactly, and at first glance, its only real difference is that the participants are solely men. The program *also* features a cast of commentators, one of whom – the aforementioned Yoshimi Tokui – was a *Terrace House* commentary veteran. Dai Ota, a former producer of *Terrace House*, additionally bridges the gap between the old and the new – his goal in *The Boyfriend* was to “portray same-sex relationships as they really are” (Rich & Notoya, 2024).

Just as in its Netflix predecessor, *The Boyfriend*’s cast members “have to juggle work and play, form friendships, find love and be on camera the whole time they’re doing it” (Plunkett 2024). Its differences come in *how* they do the above – the cast runs a chic coffee truck business (dubbed “Brewtiful U”), and one member (typically once per episode) is selected to work at it for the day, as well as select the day’s partner. Sometimes – not always – a member’s selection is treated as a “wanting-to-know-you-better” romantic hint, turning it into a pseudo-date (such as with Dai and Shun, the series’ breakout couple). The addition of talking heads to *The Boyfriend* allows for more fuel for traditional drama, especially as there are less storylines to find (participants are only in the house for a month, not the twelve months typical to *Terrace House*). This is prevalent in a scene at the end of the second episode of *The Boyfriend*, where Shun, scrolling through Dai’s phone, accidentally glimpses risqué photos of him that looked as if they were to use for dating apps.

They proceed to have an honest conversation about how that made Shun feel – he explained he had previous relationships with toxic men who were more inclined to have risqué social media profiles – and in a talking head, Shun says something unthinkable to say to Dai’s face: “I think he’s a playboy” (Hishida, 2024). The panel of commentators – all tarento, as in *Terrace House* – debate who is in the right (Shun is deemed valid in his feelings, with the caveat that he is overreacting), with drag queen Durian Lollobrigida, who joined the show “to act as a translator [for the heterosexual panel]” (Rich & Notoya, 2024), mentioning that it is actually quite common for gay men to do things similar to Dai. Shun’s comments in his talking head interview creates more drama and suspense for the viewer, as it represents a disconnect between Shun’s “true feelings” and what he is willing to express to his potential partner – *The Boyfriend* thusly manufactures slightly more drama than *Terrace House* did, yet not enough to make the show’s premise feel fake.

On Netflix’s Role in Regard to Core, Peripheries, Flow, and Counterflow

Traditional models of global media have posited a “flow” from core centers of culture (located within the West) to the rest of the world (especially the East and Global South). This core-periphery flow model was accepted for some time, but it has been re-examined by Thussu (2006) in the light of developments in the past thirty years in the form of “counterflow”: media that comes from periphery cultures to be consumed in core cultures. Bouissou (2000) notes that since the 1990s, Japan has gained extraordinary amounts of soft power due to its domestic-made media hallmarks gaining notoriety – anime and manga (such as *Sailor Moon*), J-pop (such as virtual idol Hatsune Miku), and video games (such as the *Pokémon* series) are examples of this effect. Iwabuchi (2015) notes that the Japanese government has attempted to enact policy meant to further and solidify its soft power gains under a program called Cool Japan – its cultural

policy efforts have been successful, leading to Japan seeing record amounts of tourism and increased international allure. Kim et al. (2016) note that Japanese marketing strategies that emphasize cultural media exports have been emulated by other cultures from the peripheries, with South Korea's Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) growing to surpass Japanese soft power in strength. Cicchelli and Octobre (2021) note that content that is internationally available solidifies and furthers periphery soft power in global entertainment – in the case of Japan, *Terrace House* and *The Boyfriend* are examples of this.

In fact, *Terrace House* is an example of wildly successful periphery-core counterflow in media – Japan, while a household name in the animanga, music, and video game industries, generally does not command the same level of recognition for its television programming. While there is a dearth of quality data from Netflix itself, which complicates any efforts to assert claims of the program's international popularity via first-party sources, *Opening New Doors* has subtitles available in a whopping twenty-three languages. Translation can be arduous work, particularly for a 49-episode series – the sheer availability of international subtitles that Netflix added to the program suggests that the international popularity of *Terrace House* made expansive translation worth it. While not first-party data, a 2018 thread on Reddit's r/terracehouse discussion forum features 147 comments from users of twenty-nine separate countries and territories: four in North America and the Caribbean, nine in Europe, two in Oceania, one in Africa, eight in Asia, and five in South and Central America (Reddit, 2018). Though this is not rigorously collected data by any means, it suggests that *Terrace House*'s appeal stretches beyond simply the Anglosphere to the West – and world – at large.

The Boyfriend, as a *Terrace House* successor that has enjoyed some measure of international popularity, also can be seen as an example of periphery-core counterflow, since it is

media that has originated in the East to become popular in the West. Conversely, it is also an example of traditional core-periphery flow, as well – queer culture is not normalized in Japan, where “discriminatory attitudes [against queer people] find expression in structural features of society” (Ó'móchain, 2025, p. 18). Kawasaka (2024) additionally notes that American foreign policy under the Obama administration in the 2010s has caused queer rights to gain connotations of the West and “Americanization” in Japan (p. 26). Thus, representations of queerness (which, when portrayed in a Western-normative sense) in Japanese media can, then, be seen as cultural influence from the West being imported *into* Japan.

The Boyfriend, though a domestically-produced program, is Japan’s first same-sex romance program, and its participants partake in decidedly Western-flavored expressions of queerness – in the first two episodes alone, they ask each other their English pronouns (typically in the Japanese language, people are referred to with their names and not any gendered language, so pronouns are not a big cultural mainstay as in the West), and go to a go-go boy club (which originated from the West). *The Boyfriend* is a Japanese program, but it shows Western influence in Japanese gay culture – from a Japanese perspective, it could be seen as an example of core-periphery flow. Conversely, from a Western perspective, as *The Boyfriend* is a *Japanese* program, it could be seen as an example of periphery-core counterflow.

Netflix’s role in aiding global media’s counterflow from periphery areas to core areas is clear – its role in creating *exposure*, making programs available across continents (typically accompanied by subtitles or audio dubbing in multiple languages), means that content is able to be easily enjoyed by audiences much larger than a creator or distributor would forecast in the past. Though many examples of Netflix’s role in counterflow to date involve Northeast Asian programming (Korea’s large corpus of dramas are as to Japan’s large corpus of anime), there are

popular periphery programs not originating from Northeast Asia. A recent example is *The Polygamist*, a Zulu-language program from South Africa, which enjoyed large appeal in the summer of 2026 for its stirring drama and realistic depiction of infidelity, garnering over 23 million views in a month since its release (Matiwane, 2026). In an increasingly digital world where social networking services can create lightning-fast word of mouth that propels media to notoriety, Netflix's role in content distribution means that, in theory, any international program could turn into yet another example of media counterflow – its extensive library of content has ensured that more and more producers have a chance at *truly global* success.

For the Straights, Gays, Japanese, and Foreigners – Synthesis and Reflection

Terrace House: Opening New Doors is a strong installment of a series that acts as a unique iteration on the typical reality dating television format. Instead of being a glitzy, glamorous take on the dramatic, wild lives and emotional moments of its participants like its Western competitors (*Big Brother*, for instance, as a fellow shared-house program), *Terrace House* takes a wildly successful risk with its conspicuous, slow-burn approach to chronicling the down-to-earth, normal lives and emotional moments of its participants. Lauded as “brazenly simple” (Washington, 2020), the program has garnered immense praise in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *BBC News* – Kaata Sakamoto, a Netflix JP content manager at the time of his 2017 interview in *BuzzFeed News*, admits that “the show has exceeded our expectations in terms of international viewership” (Nakaji Monier, 2017). Western markets are extremely oversaturated with programs rife with talking heads, calculated drama, and loud fighting. In retrospect, it feels as though it was only a matter of time until a foreign show that “turns the real drama of our daily lives into entertainment” (Reich, 2020). Translator and author Matt Alt reflects that the show went internationally viral, which when contrasted with “the hallmark of

American reality TV,” being “artificially created negative drama and hostility,” the difference of *Terrace House* “is definitely a window into the Japanese style of reality TV, which is less about creating drama and more about creating camaraderie” (Nakaji Monier, 2017).

Wason (2020) similarly claims that *Terrace House* “provides a window into Japanese culture” that may attract curious viewers. Many online reviews of the program share a common point of expressing surprise about how polite participants are, as it seems as though such politeness is directly antithetical to everything about traditional reality television. Ryota Yamasato, a member of the commentator panel of *Opening New Doors*, notes that how the *Terrace House* participants act “gives a fascinating and realistic insight into modern Japanese society and the way people interact here” (Hernon, 2017). The global wave of Japanese soft power, even though it has since been surpassed by Korean soft power in recent years, has potentially contributed to *Terrace House*’s popularity. Younger viewers may already be pre-exposed to certain Japanese cultural elements through popular media formats (such as J-drama or manga), and may feel more comfortable with eagerly consuming Japanese media as a result of it.

Just as in the West, *Terrace House*’s participants are all attractive, young people – par for the course in the reality genre – and the same can be said for *The Boyfriend*. Some of *The Boyfriend*’s allure is derived from the fact that it is Japan’s first – and thus far, only – gay dating show, which is a notable distinction because of how gay marriage is currently not legalized in the country. A gay reality dating show is regrettably not an incredibly common thing, despite Gamson’s (2013) assertion that “much reality television programming has targeted ... gay audiences” (p. 229). With how clear it is that *The Boyfriend*’s shots are made with a gay male (or, at the least, an attracted-to-men) audience in mind, it makes all the sense in the world that it would do well as an internationally available Netflix title: sexual desire can always cross

linguistic barriers. Queer people tend to seek out positive representations of people like them, and a show that acts as “an examination of how gay men live openly in Japan” (Levitt, 2024) feels as though it could be both a subject of high audience interest, as well as something that captures the hearts of queer people who yearn to see positive media attention.

Of course, *The Boyfriend*’s open secret that it is, in some way, a budding spiritual successor to the hit that *Terrace House* was because of its shared origins (i.e., producer Dai Ota) and format (e.g., commentators, shared house). Plunkett (2024) goes as far as to say it is “Terrace House rebranded ... the successor show fans have been waiting years for.” On Reddit’s r/terracehouse discussion forum, hundreds of comments have been made about the show in dedicated discussion threads. It is undeniable that its popularity (the show was in Netflix JP’s Top Ten rankings for six consecutive weeks) at least in part stems from *Terrace House*’s legacy. Catering to fans of a well-loved format, if done right, can be a recipe for success, and the feedback in English-language media that positively compares *The Boyfriend* to *Terrace House* speaks to the success that the show has been. Kaata Sakamoto, currently Netflix JP’s vice president of content, notes in an interview with *Reuters*: “This year [2024] in particular we’re happy that productions such as ... reality-romance show *The Boyfriend* have been watched by so many people” (Nussey, 2024). In less than two weeks after the publishing of the *Reuters* interview, *The Boyfriend* was renewed for a second season, giving the show another chance to appeal to global audiences (Netflix, 2024).

Alba (2016), in a *Wired* article about *Terrace House* featuring somewhat backhanded praise, makes the case that “global TV could start to look a lot less like the Americanization of global entertainment and more like a cultural exchange” – this outlook, nearly ten years onwards, feels more and more true. Buoyed by bona-fide can’t-miss international hits such as *Terrace*

House and *Squid Game*, supported by plenty of popular-yet-specialized titles (e.g., a bevy of K-drama and anime), and with plenty of more niche international titles (with diehard fans) to fill in the gaps, Netflix's dream of becoming "a global TV network" (Lobato, 2019, p. 2) seems like it is starting to be realized, now more than ever.

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