

## Youth Perceptions of the *Menhera* Phenomenon Among Teenage Girls in Japan

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**Abstract.** In recent years, discussions on mental health in Japan have increasingly been linked to youth digital culture and gendered forms of emotional expression. One phenomenon that has emerged in this context is *menhera*, a term commonly used to describe teenage girls who openly express psychological vulnerability through social media and popular culture. This phenomenon has generated diverse social perceptions among Japanese society. This study aims to analyze Japanese youths' perceptions of the *menhera* phenomenon among teenage girls and to understand the social meanings attached to this label in contemporary Japanese society. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through an online survey involving 13 Japanese respondents aged between 20 and 35 years. Respondents were asked to share their views on the characteristics, social image, and societal responses toward teenage girls labeled as *menhera*. The findings indicate that many respondents perceive *menhera* as representing emotional instability, mental health vulnerability, and attention-seeking behavior, which often leads to negative stereotypes and social stigma. However, several respondents also expressed more empathetic perspectives, viewing the phenomenon as a form of emotional expression influenced by social pressures, gender expectations, and the dynamics of digital culture. These findings suggest that youth perceptions play an important role in shaping the social meaning of the *menhera* phenomenon and highlight the intersection between mental health stigma, gender norms, and digital culture in contemporary Japanese society.

**Keyword :** *Menhera*, Japanese Youth Perception, Teenage Girls, Mental Health, Japanese Digital Culture

### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Social perceptions of mental health are a crucial issue in contemporary psychology and cultural studies, as the stigma associated with it can be a major barrier to individuals seeking help and maintaining psychological well-being. In the digital age, mental health experiences are increasingly influenced by identity pressures, online social interactions, and exposure to media culture, which shape how individuals express their emotions and vulnerabilities (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This suggests that mental health stigma exists not only in clinical settings but also in everyday social life, particularly among young people. Furthermore, mental health stigma remains a global challenge, contributing to social discrimination, interpersonal avoidance, and barriers to accessing emotional and psychological support (Henderson & Gronholm, 2023). Individuals experiencing stigma tend to hide their feelings for fear of being misunderstood or shunned, which can ultimately exacerbate their social isolation and emotional well-being. These findings confirm that social perceptions of perceived deviant emotional expression, such as those embodied in the *menhera* phenomenon, have the potential to have significant psychosocial impacts in contemporary society. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety are common among adolescents. Beyond adolescents, common mental disorders like depression and anxiety can occur across various age groups, including young adults

and adults. The relationship between social media use and mental health has received attention in various global studies. Digital life can impact an individual's psychological well-being through social pressure, the process of online identity formation, and the dynamics of interpersonal interactions that occur in online spaces (Odgers & Jensen, 2020) These findings suggest that an individual's emotional experiences cannot be separated from the digital cultural context that shapes how they express psychological vulnerability.

Based on research (Terada & Watanabe, 2022) which interviewed individuals considered part of the *menhera* community, the majority of participants were young women. These findings suggest that the *menhera* phenomenon is often associated with women. In addition, women in particular tend to have a higher vulnerability than men to emotional disorders, the risk for depression increases three to four times higher at the start of menstruation for women, (Umeda et al., 2022) this fact confirms that biological factors such as hormonal changes as well as social pressures related to beauty standards and gender roles can increase the risk of mental health in adolescent girls.

This phenomenon provides a perfect backdrop for understanding the emergence of the term "*Menhera*" (メンヘラ), a popular term in Japan derived from the word "mental health-er," which initially referred to individuals with mental health issues but over time evolved into a social identity closely associated with women with emotional instability. Furthermore, *Menhera* can be understood as part of the dynamics of Japanese youth subculture, which develops through online communities and digital popular culture. Thus, "*menhera*," originally a term for people with mental health issues, has evolved into a subcultural term for mental vulnerability, self-identity, and social stigma (Seko & Kikuchi, 2022). However, stigma against mental disorders persists in Japanese society, despite increasing awareness of mental health (Kasahara-Kiritani et al., 2018). Therefore, the term "*Menhera*" is not only for individuals with mental health issues but also a social phenomenon that demonstrates how groups in Japan, especially young people, view mental health through a social lens.

Social perceptions of the *menhera* phenomenon among Japanese women are becoming increasingly relevant to examine because public understanding of mental health is never neutral but is always influenced by cultural values and social norms that shape how emotions and individual identities are interpreted in everyday life (Kirmayer & Minas, 2020). The representation of emotionally unstable characters in Japanese popular culture may also influence how society interprets emotional vulnerability in real life. Previous studies on yandere characters indicate that Japanese audiences often perceive obsessive emotional behavior as both attractive and frightening, depending on whether it exists in fictional or real-life contexts (Vinie & Pipiet, 2025). Previous research on the *menhera* phenomenon has been conducted by (Seko & Kikuchi, 2022), who examined the experiences of individuals who identify as *menhera* in online communities. However, that study focused more on the subjective experiences of *menhera* participants and did not address how the younger generation in Japan views the phenomenon. Furthermore, previous research by (Terada & Watanabe, 2022) only addressed the experiences of individuals who identify as part of the *menhera* community. Studies on how the phenomenon is perceived by the younger generation, particularly in the context of Japanese women, are relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the perceptions of Japanese youth groups regarding the *menhera* phenomenon among Japanese adolescent girls within the context of digital culture and contemporary social interactions. This research is expected to contribute to the study of contemporary Japanese culture by examining the *menhera* phenomenon as a form of

sociocultural construction arising from the interaction between gender norms, emotional expression, and mental health stigma in modern society. This research uses a perspective that views mental health as a social and cultural phenomenon. This approach aligns with the view (Kirmayer & Minas, 2020) that mental health is not merely a clinical category, but also a social experience shaped by cultural values and societal practices. Interpreting emotional vulnerability. Using a qualitative approach based on public perceptions of a specific age group, this study broadens understanding of how social media and popular culture play a role in shaping representations and social acceptance of the *menhera* phenomenon as a cultural issue that reflects the complex relationship between emotion, gender, and stigma in contemporary Japan.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

(Terada & Watanabe, 2022). “*Yamu*” (falling ill) for the youth: A “*menhera*” narrative by female students. The article explains that “*menhera*” is not only a negative label, but a self-expression of emotional pain, loneliness, and identity among young women, sometimes helping them understand themselves better.

(Seko & Kikuchi, 2022). Mentally ill and cute as hell: *Menhera* girls and portrayals of self-injury in Japanese popular culture. *Journal of Youth Studies*. The article argues that Japanese popular culture often turns “*menhera*” and mental illness into a “cute aesthetic,” which both increases visibility but also risks oversimplifying or glamorizing serious issues.

(Doi et al., 2021). Association between serum lipid levels, resilience, and self-esteem in Japanese adolescents: Results from the A-CHILD study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. The study shows that physical condition is linked to mental strength and self-esteem in adolescents, highlighting the connection between body and mental health.

From the three previous articles above, it can be seen that *menhera* is indeed prone to occur among young women, even so, there has not been any research that specifically examines how young people view this phenomenon and how they usually respond to this phenomenon. Therefore this research focuses on psychosocial and not psychological.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study using a descriptive qualitative approach, providing concrete, step by step examples, such as selecting target respondents, developing questions, and initial coding and categorizing the data. (Villamin et al., 2025) stated that the data collection and analysis procedures followed the practical steps outlined in the work examples for descriptive qualitative design. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on subjective meanings and experiences, including the social constructions that led to the development of the term “*menhera*” in Japanese society, particularly among young people.

Respondents in this study were aged 20–35, categorized as young adults. In social studies and developmental psychology, this age group is often considered part of youth because they are in the transition phase toward social and economic maturity where Japanese people in this age range are

active in using social media and understand the culture and trends on the internet, the initial target is 20–25 respondents or until reaching data saturation, which is a condition when the information obtained from respondents is considered adequate and no longer produces new relevant findings, but data saturation is reached at the 13th respondent. In qualitative research, the number of participants is often determined based on the principle of saturation, which is when the data obtained no longer produces new themes (Hennink et al., 2017). A qualitative approach is used to understand social meanings and experiences in depth in a particular context (Maxwell, 2022). Data was collected by distributing google forms containing a total of 46 questions and then distributed through random social media such as *Instagram*, *LINE* and *X or Twitter*, to reach respondents who are native Japanese, a total of 9 questions were selected which included 7 choice questions and 2 questions with open answers, this study focuses the analysis on the 9 questions that are most relevant to the main categories of the problem formulation, including the representative and stigma of the term *menhera*, factors that build the term *menhera*, the impact or influence of the term *menhera* on the perception of youth in Japan. All data results will be presented in tables and will be analyzed using descriptive narratives and then draw conclusions about the perception of youth in Japan towards the *menhera* phenomenon.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of research based on an online survey of 13 respondents, of which 13 of the 13 respondents answered that they were young people aged 20-24 years who could still be called young people and included in the young adult group of Japanese society. In accordance with the descriptive qualitative approach, this study reached data saturation at the 13th respondent, when the answers that appeared began to repeat and did not produce significant new themes. In addition, limitations when distributing the survey to obtain appropriate respondents were very difficult. Therefore, the data is not intended to be statistically generalized, but rather to describe the patterns of perception, tendencies of meaning, and the main themes that emerged in the understanding of young respondents who are in the productive age of the *menhera* phenomenon. Based on the data grouping process, the research findings are divided into three main categories, namely the representation of the *menhera* phenomenon, socio-cultural factors that form meaning, and the impact of the *menhera* phenomenon according to young people in Japan.

**Table 1** Presentation of Key Findings of the *Menhera* Perception Survey

| Focus of Findings                          | Questions  | Meaning   |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Menhera</i> as a subcultural phenomenon | Are <i>menhera</i> considered part of Japanese youth subculture? | Respondents viewed <i>menhera</i> as not just a mental health term, but as having evolved into a vibrant social identity within Japanese popular culture and digital communities. |
| <i>Menhera</i> as a social stigma label    | Is <i>menhera</i> associated with attention-seeking behavior?    | The <i>menhera</i> phenomenon is perceived as a negative label  |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   |   | attached to individuals with high emotional expression, thus demonstrating the strength of social stereotypes in society.   |
| Gender dimensions in <i>menhera</i> 's perception | Is the <i>menhera</i> more often attached to women?   | Respondents' perceptions indicate a tendency towards genderization, where women's emotional vulnerability is more easily stigmatized than men's.  |
| Discomfort in social relations                    | Do people feel uncomfortable interacting with individuals called <i>menhera</i> ?                                   | The <i>menhera</i> label gives rise to social distance and avoidance, as the individual is perceived as differing from the accepted emotional norms within the youth social environment.  |
| Social media as a primary source of meaning       | Is social media a major factor in shaping understanding of <i>menhera</i> ?   | Social media plays a dominant role in shaping collective representations of <i>menhera</i> , including the spread of stereotypes and subcultural aesthetics.                              |
| Mental health stigma in Japan                     | Is the stigma against mental health issues still strong in Japanese society, especially among youth social circles? | Respondents assessed that Japanese cultural norms still view mental health issues as sensitive and shameful, so labels such as <i>menhera</i> are easily used in a discriminatory manner. |
| Social impact in real life                        | Are individuals who are referred to as <i>menhera</i> more likely to experience social                              | Respondents believed the stigma had a direct impact on social and   |

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|--|--|--|
|  | disadvantage at school/work?   | professional opportunities, especially in Japanese society which emphasizes harmony and productivity.  |
| Ambivalent and empathetic perception                   | Do all respondents view <i>menhera</i> negatively?   | Open-ended responses revealed ambivalence: some respondents felt fearful and kept their distance, while others emphasized the importance of empathy and emotional support. |
| <i>Menhera</i> as a contemporary cultural construction | Is the <i>menhera</i> understood as a cultural phenomenon, rather than simply a psychological label? | <i>Menhera</i> has developed as a socio-cultural phenomenon that reflects the relationship between emotion, gender, stigma, and modern Japanese digital culture.           |

**Table 2** Respondents Open Answers about the *Menhera* Phenomenon

| Focus of Findings           | Questions   | Translations  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Trauma and past experiences | 「過去のトラウマ、幼少期の虐待や、いじめ、恋愛における辛い経験などの過去に負った心の傷が…感情のコントロールが苦手になる」 | “Past trauma such as childhood abuse, bullying, or bitter experiences in relationships can make it difficult for someone to trust others, always feel anxious, have low self-esteem, and have difficulty controlling emotions.” |
| Emotional dependence in     | 「恋人に重くなったり依存したりする傾向にある…多くの人                                   | "I also tend to become overly dependent on my partner. Many people in   |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| romantic relationships  | 「が他人からの愛に飢えていると思う。それがメンヘラに繋がっている気がする」                            | Japan are starved for affection, and I think that has something to do with <i>menhera</i> ."   |
| The pressure of Japanese cultural homogeneity                     | 「恋人に重くなったり依存したりする傾向にある…多くの人々が他人からの愛に飢えていると思う。それがメンヘラに繋がっている気がする」 | "In Japan there is often an environment that demands people have the same opinions and behaviors, and that can influence individuals."   |
| Negative perceptions and social avoidance                         | 「恋人に重くなったり依存したりする傾向にある…多くの人々が他人からの愛に飢えていると思う。それがメンヘラに繋がっている気がする」 | "In Japan there is often an environment that demands people have the same opinions and behaviors, and that can influence individuals."   |
| An empathetic perspective on <i>menhera</i>                       | 「メンヘラと言われても同じ人間…誰にでもメンヘラになる可能性がある」                               | "Even though they're called <i>menhera</i> , they're still human beings. Anyone can become a <i>menhera</i> depending on their life experiences, so it's important to provide support and guidance." |
| Fear and social stereotypes                                       | 「怖いなあと感じる」   | "I feel scared."   |
| Neutral attitude towards the term <i>menhera</i>                  | 「特に何も思わない」   | "I'm not thinking about anything in particular."   |
| The meaning of <i>menhera</i> is relative and not always negative | 「必ずしもネガティブなことではないと思う。それは一種の行動であり欲求なのかもしれない」                      | "I don't think <i>menhera</i> is always a negative thing. It might be a form of behavior or an emotional need."  |

The table above is not intended as a quantitative statistical representation, but rather as a mapping of the trends in respondents' perceptions of the *menhera* phenomenon, which is a youth phenomenon. The primary focus of this study is the sociocultural meanings emerging from respondents' answers, both in multiple-choice and open-ended narrative formats.

### ***Menhera* as a Social Representation and Subcultural Identity**

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents agreed that the *menhera* phenomenon is part of Japanese youth subculture. This finding confirms that the term *menhera* has undergone a shift in meaning, from being originally associated with mental health to a social identity that exists in popular culture and digital spaces. This aligns with (Seko & Kikuchi, 2022) who argue that *menhera* can be understood as part of a dynamic Japanese subculture that develops within Japanese popular culture, particularly through media representations that link mental vulnerability to youth identity. Within (Moscovici, 2000) framework of social representation, abstract phenomena such as mental health are often viewed as symbols or labels that are easily recognized by the public. Thus, *menhera* has developed as a form of collective understanding produced through social communication, popular media, and digital interactions.

### **Social Stigma and Negative Labeling: *Menhera* as Attention-Seeking**

Research findings show that perceptions of *menhera* are strongly influenced by stigma. The majority of respondents associated *menhera* with attention-seeking behavior. This suggests that the term is often understood as a negative stereotype, rather than as a valid form of emotional experience. In (Goffman, 1963) theory of stigma, this kind of social labeling creates a spoiled identity, an individual's identity that is "damaged" because it is perceived as deviating from social norms. Individuals labeled *menhera* are no longer seen as whole individuals, but are reduced to symbols of emotional instability. This view is reflected in the respondents' open-ended responses:

「マイナスなイメージを抱く...だからそもそも関わらないようにしている」

(“I have a negative image, and therefore I choose not to engage.”)

This response demonstrates that stigma leads to social avoidance and limits interpersonal interactions. Contemporary research shows that mental health stigma remains a global challenge that impacts social discrimination (Thorncroft et al., 2022).

### **The Genderization of *Menhera* and Young Women's Emotional Norms**

The survey results showed that nearly half of respondents believed the *menhera* label was more frequently attached to young women. This finding suggests that the phenomenon is not gender-neutral, but rather related to cultural constructions about women and emotions. In the Japanese context, women are often associated with more open emotional expression, but at the same time, such expression is more easily perceived as excessive and stigmatized. This reinforces *menhera's* position as a gendered stigmatized label, meaning that it is more easily attached to women than to men. Research (Umeda et al., 2022), also shows that adolescent girls are at higher risk of emotional distress and depression due to biological factors and social pressures related to gender roles.

## Social Distancing and Discomfort in Social Interactions

The majority of respondents stated that society feels uncomfortable interacting with individuals referred to as *menhera*. This finding demonstrates that stigma goes beyond stereotypes and impacts real social relationships in everyday life. (Goffman, 1963) explained that stigma results in the practice of social distancing, namely the tendency for society to distance itself from individuals who are perceived as “different” or deviant from social norms. This is reflected in the respondents' brief responses:

「怖いなあと感じる」

(*I feel scared.*)

This fear demonstrates how the *menhera* label can evoke perceptions of social threat, rather than empathetic understanding.

## Social Media as an Arena for the Formation of Meanings of *Menhera*

Data shows that the majority of respondents understand the *menhera* phenomenon primarily through social media. This finding confirms that digital spaces are a primary arena for the formation of social representations of mental health. In the digital era, emotional phenomena like *menhera* also circulate through social media, where online spaces influence how adolescents display and understand psychological vulnerabilities (Odgers & Jensen, 2020), where emotional phenomena like *menhera* circulate as digital symbols. From (Moscovici, 2000) perspective, social representations are formed through collective communication. In the modern context, social media accelerates this process as terms like *menhera* spread through online communities, popular aesthetics, and digital narratives. (Odgers & Jensen, 2020) emphasize that adolescent mental health in the digital age is heavily influenced by social media spaces, which shape identities and public perceptions.

## Japanese Cultural Context: Conformity and Social Pressure

Japanese culture has historically emphasized the value of social harmony and the tendency to change attitudes to conform to prevailing cultural or social norms within a society. Pressure to conform to group norms can increase the emotional burden on individuals perceived as different, especially among younger generations who are still forming their social identities. This is consistent with (Kasahara-Kiritani et al., 2018) who noted that stigma against mental disorders persists in Japanese society despite increasing awareness of mental health. Respondents' open-ended responses highlighted that the *menhera* phenomenon is also related to Japanese cultural pressures that demand behavioral uniformity:

「日本では同一の意見や行動を求められる環境が多々あり...影響されることがある」

(*In Japan, there is often a demand to conform to the same opinions and behaviors.*)

This statement suggests that the cultural norms common in Japanese society can exacerbate emotional distress for individuals, especially the younger generation who are developing a social identity.

## Social Impact: Disadvantages in School and the Workplace

The majority of respondents believe that individuals labeled as *menhera* are more likely to experience social disadvantages in school and the workplace. Mental health stigma extends beyond general stereotypes and impacts individuals' access to education and employment. Individuals with negative labels often experience social disadvantages in the form of exclusion, limited professional opportunities, and barriers to work relationships. This aligns with global findings that mental health stigma is a form of structural discrimination that impacts the social participation of young individuals (Henderson & Gronholm, 2023; Thornicroft et al., 2022) This suggests that stigma has a structural impact in Japanese society, which emphasizes productivity and social harmony. However, there are also empathetic perspectives that reject stigma:

誰にでもメンヘラになる可能性がある...寄り添い心のケアが大事」

*(Anyone can be a menhera, and it's important to provide support and emotional care.)*

This perspective demonstrates the negotiation of social representations, suggesting that the *menhera* phenomenon is not always perceived negatively.

## *Menhera* as an Ambivalent Cultural Phenomenon

Overall, the research findings indicate that social perceptions of *menhera* are ambivalent: stigma and social avoidance are strong, but there is also room for empathy and understanding. Respondents also emphasized that the concept of *menhera* is not always negative:

「必ずしもネガティブなことではない...一種の欲求なのかもしれない」

*(This is not always negative; it may represent a social necessity.)*

Thus, *menhera* can be understood as a contemporary cultural construct reflecting the complex relationship between emotion, gender, stigma, and modern Japanese digital culture.

This study has several limitations that require consideration. First, the relatively limited number of respondents (13) makes the findings inaccurate and cannot be generalized to represent all Japanese society, including Japanese youth. Second, the respondents in this study were aged 20–35, which falls into the category of young adults or youth. Therefore, the results of this study more closely reflect the perceptions of this age group regarding the *menhera* phenomenon among Japanese women. Therefore, the categorizations discussed in this discussion need to be understood in the context of the characteristics of the respondents, who are predominantly young adults who are active users of digital media. Third, the research data were obtained through an online survey, so respondents' perceptions are strongly influenced by their personal experiences and exposure to social media. Furthermore, the *menhera* phenomenon is a term that has evolved within Japanese digital culture, so its meaning can change according to generational dynamics and specific social spaces. Therefore, the categorizations above are appropriate for the 13 respondents who answered.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that Japanese youth aged 20–35 tend to interpret the term "menhera" as a social label applied to women perceived as emotionally unstable. In the respondents' perceptions, the term is often associated with negative images such as emotional dependency, behavior considered troublesome in social relationships, and difficulty maintaining stable interpersonal relationships. These findings suggest that, in the view of some Japanese youth, "menhera" is not only understood as a mental health issue but also as a social stereotype of women perceived as deviating from accepted emotional norms.

Furthermore, these perceptions are formed through respondents' interactions with digital media, popular culture, and social experiences in their environment. Therefore, the "menhera" phenomenon, in the context of this study, can be understood as a social construct that develops within Japan's digital cultural space and influences how Japanese youth view and respond to women labeled as "menhera."

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