

# A New Meaning of Mental Health in Japanese Net World

Gentaro KATO

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### 要 約

This article focuses on the shift of the usage and the meaning of the words on mental health. Generally, the unhealth can be a reason of removing from the love interest. However, some exceptional discourses have become known in Japanese net world.

*Menhera* is a net slang that indicates people who need some mental health care. It is a compound word that consists of mental, health and a suffix -er. Originally, people who may come to BBS about mental health were called as *menherā* (men-heal-er). Later, it changes to shorter and *menhera* is sometimes used as a kind of discriminative words. However, only recently, we come across *menhera* as some positive meanings, for example *kawaii* (pretty, lovely).

In parallel with it, a typology of girl characters becomes popular. It categorizes girl characters of games, especially dating simulation games, or animations. They sometimes labels every girls and women in a positive sense or as an attractive point. *Yandere* is a type of the girl who has a disposition of blind love sometimes to the degree like mental disease. In a precise sense, *menhera* and *yandere* are different: the former is narcissistic, and the latter is borderline personality. However, these two words are ones of the most distinctive on the change of the meaning about mental health and disease.

It has been often said that their dependency on lover sometimes can be attractive and *menhera* / *yandere* oriented is a kind of projection for the person who has been impossible of achievement in love or human relationship. However, this new meaning spreads not only to boys' eye towards girls but also to the girl's fashion and identity. This tendency makes the conventional analysis invalid. We also see bandages and eye patches as fashion items so that now we have to reconsider the meaning of health and disease.

**Keywords:** Japanese subculture, mental health, meaning of words

## Introduction

This article focuses on the shift of the usage and the meaning of the words on mental health. Generally, ill health can be a reason of removing from the love interest. However, some exceptional discourses have become known in Japanese net world. This article chases the transformation about the recognition of mental health in the Japanese subculture. It can be said that the concept of mental health is gradually formed after the shift of the definition of mental diseases in 1980s. The establishment of diagnostic criteria based on statistics after Rosenhan experiment, which suggested that psychiatrists cannot distinguish between sane and insane person, and the problem of adapting the case have been argued. This change in psychiatry affects the modification of the recognition by the ordinary people.

It may also transform the category of mental disease in social life are subjected to psychiatric treatment, specifically the suggestions of cases and theories other than melancholic type. For example, the type that the maladjustment in the office is recognized but hypomania is also seen while he/she is devoted at his/her hobby, is often called as new type depression. However, some cases such as the second disorder caused by the autism spectrum cannot be covered by the existing classification. And it can be thought that the change would happen if he/she said to those around him/her or those communicating on the Internet, "I was diagnosed as depression" while he/she were in the hypomanic status.

It is sociologically interesting that psychiatry approaches agonies in everyday life. This article, however, does not deeply argue on the social background of contemporary psychiatry but focuses only on the great transformation of the image about mental health, mental diseases and mental patients. The discourse of "*menhera* (is) *kawaii*", which is often seen in the recent net world in Japan, is the key of this analysis. First, two works will be introduced in the chapter 1. They contributed the recognition of mental diseases in Japanese subculture. At the chapter 2, *menhera* will be explained and the chapter 3 draws the transformation of the concepts with *yandere*. *Yami-kawaii* which is directly combined with the description of *kawaii* will be dealt on the chapter 4. The last chapter will suggest a conclusion of this article with the consciousness on Foucault's "Madness and Civilization".

### 1. the prehistory.

"Give my regards to Black Jack: psychiatry series" (Sato 2004) had been serialized by Kodansha "Morning" magazine since 2002. It is said that the title comes from Tezuka

Osamu's "Black Jack" and "Give my regards to Bukkira". The whole story is that the main character Saito Ejiro grows up as a medical doctor through several problems: absurdities of clinical training system, medical distortions due to medical office, inconsistencies of health insurance system, conflicts with patients and family. The psychiatry series had been serialized since 2004. It dealt with schizophrenia as the main topic and Saito faced on his sense of discrimination.

The other is "My partner got depression" (Hosokawa 2006). The writer's husband got depression and she drew their struggle against it. She had an image of "like a mentally weak person" or "like a neurosis" on depression. However, she felt that there were many people around them who had poor knowledge and misunderstandings and she wanted to spread the correct recognition on depression. This work was dramatized on 2009 by NHK with Fujiwara Norika and Harada Taizo.

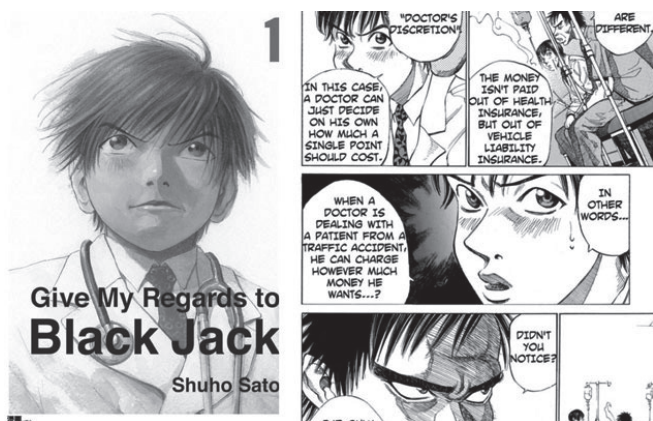


Figure 1: Give my regards to Black Jack



Figure 2: My partner got depression

One is serious, the other is comical; but both works contribute general recognition of psychiatric disease. Actually, there has been some boards about mental health in a BBS since around 2000. However, it can be said that these titles widely speeded the mental problems as common knowledge including the one in BBS. The next chapter will show the concept of mental disease and mental patient formed in Japanese net world.

## 2. *menhera* and its original meaning

As it is well known, Japanese BBS has been mainly developed in "2 channel": mental health boards were established in 1999 as manic and depressive boards in it. Some participants

claimed wider naming that contains withdrawal, eating disorder, interpersonal fear, schizophrenia etc. so that a mental health board was opened on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2000<sup>1</sup>. According to *menhera.jp*, a user already named the abbreviation, “*menheru*”, for mental health on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2000. The site also reveals that they use it as the meaning of “people who may come to the mental health boards”, “people who has some problems on mental health” or “people who suffer from mental troubles” at not later than the begging of 2001. Moreover, the site points out the usage of “*menherā*”, which is attached a suffix of *er* to *menheru*, was born before November of 2001 and it was spread toward the end of the year. Needless to say, *menhera* is the abbreviation for *menherā*, which seems to be fixed by 2003<sup>2</sup>.

It can be said that some BBS and net dailies lead to widely recognize the people who needs mental health both conceptually and ontologically. However, residents of the mental health boards are originally in bad image. The actual visitors of the boards are mainly patients, their family, their friends or their partners. The board was the place of information exchange, but it could also be the place for abusing or taking the wound-licking process to each other.

As it is mentioned above, *menhera* was originally used when one disrespected them. However, it covers several meanings later, for example: people who have symptoms of mental disease (wrist slashing, stalking), people who make abnormal actions (accessing SNS too frequently), or people who make too negative utterances (“I’ve finished…”). This chapter argues the birth of *menhera* and its primary meaning. In the next chapter, the change of the meaning on *menhera* will be revealed.

### 3. Change the meaning

Generally, a kind of diseases or disorders can be a reason of removing from love interests. The image of *menhera* in love has not been good as well. Of course, some topics on love had been seen in mental health boards, but most subjects were about some troubles. *Menhera* people have not been positive object of love. Only recently, however, we can sometimes see some posts that “*menhera* is *kawaii*”<sup>3</sup>.

Here, some quotations from the Internet will be shown. They are picked up at random in terms of the age and gender of writers. I think the age is from teen to 30s and the gender is both. However, I want to show only about the creating the meaning of a concept so that the property of writers is not so important now.

(1) *Menhera* is somehow *kawaii* because I can see that they need affections.

- (2) Because *menhera* boyfriend displays his inside, we can be more intimate. It's kawaii especially when I open my heart and he depends on me. I prefer the man spoiling me to not.
- (3) They seem to make somehow efforts for me.
- (4) She is loving me so much as to tie me down. It makes me to feel happy.
- (5) Well, I like dependent *menhera* ... or the girl who makes efforts with all her heart. Dependent types have a high ratio of it.

We can see some positive usages about *menhera*. Dependency can be a keyword but as some of you know, it is sometimes picked up for the feature of Japanese people. The quotation (4) indicates that even restriction, which is sometimes a cause of troubles with mental disease, can be positive. It is possible that the writer is also a patient and this post may be analyzed as codependency. However, let us just confirm the new feeling here. I introduce one more concept.

*Yandere* is a derivative term from *tsundere*, which means a two-sided character of *tsuntsun* (spiky or antagonistic) and *dere* (love struck or excessively favorable). Originally, *tsundere* is an element of enchantment and fascination toward a gaming character, especially in dating games. However, it has been extended to real women's character; a magazine introduced it as a technic to make a kind of love conquests to men<sup>4</sup>. *Yandere* is also used predominantly for manga-anime or gaming characters. The part of *tsun* is changed to *yan*, which is the stem of *yamu/yande iru* (being sick). That is, it means that (her/his) expression of love is too much to the degree like psychiatric symptoms, for example: they may say, "You must be happy only if I am with you," or "If you disturb him, I will kill you".

Here, let me show the comparison of *menhera* and *yandere*. The feature of *menhera* is in the type of narcissistic personal disorder. They want attention or love by everyone so that the other person is also acceptable as their partner. Their possible problem behavior may be self-injury or suicide. The person of narcissistic personal disorder has a high self-evaluation that is superior to the others, but it is very fragile and easy to collapse. They have difficulty on treating criticisms so that they both require to others and take self-injuries. Of course, the self-injury such as wrist slushing often means requiring to others<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, *yandere* is in the type of borderline personal disorder. They need one and only and they sometimes claim the same way to the partner. Borderline personal disorder, as it is named, has both elements of neurosis and schizophrenia such as edginess and

lack of cool judgement. They are afraid of being got rid by others both in the reality and their delusion so that they involve people around them. *Yandere*'s aggression often goes not only to the third person but also the object of their interest. The process of getting like a sick instead of the superficial madness is important.

<p><u><i>menhera</i></u>  narcissistic personal disorder  want attention or love by everyone  the other person is also OK  self-injury, suicide</p>	<p><u><i>yandere</i></u>  borderline personal disorder  need one and only  sometimes claim the same way to the partner</p>
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Figure 3: comparison of *menhera* and *yandere*

However, these are often confused in actual usages, even in psychiatric diagnoses between narcissistic personal disorder and borderline personal disorder. For example, self-injury is often picked up in borderline personal disorder. Sometimes psycho-killer is included in *yandere*, but it is normally anti-social personality disorder instead of borderline. Moreover, some patients contract narcissistic and borderline together.

Here, let me show some quotation about *yandere*. Dependency may be the keyword again and we can find that the positive point of *yandere* is not so different from the discourses on *menhera*.

(6) It is often said that Japanese men are not good at love expressions. However, women sometimes want straight words as such. A *yandere* boyfriend may answer it.

(7) "I like dependent *yandere*, because I'm a man"

"Is a man willing to be depended on?"

"It's not generally, but I think some have such a tendency. A man really likes to be relied on, to be depended on or to be respected."

I want to confirm again that the positive evaluation of *menhera* and *yandere* is not so deferent, that is, jealousy, temper, dependency can be retrieved and be accepted as an expression of love. A problem behavior of mental disease in general contexts changes into a depth of love in this context. It can be said that the evaluators also need some kinds of dependency because it seems important that they are loved wholeheartedly and single-minded. Even restraint and aggression are also the sign of depending on them, that is, the sign of the depth of love.

Giddens pointed out this transformation in contemporary society (Giddens 1992); the reconfirmation of sustaining the love is important in confluent love. Pure relationship represented by confluent love does not have any forces to continue so that people face to the anxiety of dissolving the relationship. In that sense, the expression of loving has been required each other.

The transformation of intimacy can be analyzed in terms of the building of trust mechanisms; and ... personal trust relations ... are closely bound up with a situation in which the construction of the self becomes a reflexive project<sup>6</sup>.

It can be said that the anxiety for the persistence of a relationship is one of the cause of *menhera/yandere* behavior. Such conducts may be just the adjustment of the unwilling consequence in human relationships. Love relationship is often most important for young people and confirming the persistence of the love again and again is needed because the love relation is very easy to collapse in contemporary society<sup>7</sup>. This is true not only for mental patients but also for every people. It can be said that such a transformation of love circumstance is one of the cause of changing the meaning of *menhera/yandere*. In this chapter, we have seen the beginning of the transformation of *menhera* and *yandere* and the next phase will be shown in the next chapter.

#### 4. Symbolizing the evaluation

Japanese net world in recent years treats *menhera* and *yandere* as a given concept. Both of them are used everywhere and the meaning of them are more casual and less morbid. That is, *menhera* and *yandere* has been used even for the disposition of some kinds of behaviors.

(8) A *menhera* beats another *menhera* — this is an expression of the intension to differentiate the real from the fashion.

This quotation denotes *menhera* can be a fashion and we know that it has been symbolized. The word of “*menhera* as 8<sup>th</sup> grade syndrome (*chuni byo*)” is well representing as a symbolic usage. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade syndrome is an interesting term in Japanese net culture; a junior high school student often pretends like an adult. For example, he/she begins to drink coffee without sugar, says to his/her mother, “Respect my private life,” or thinks that adults are dirty. They

sometimes use the words of what an anime character said. It can be analyzed as the desire for recognition and for self-identification. *Menhera* is also used as a tool of self-identification and such usages are not really morbid.

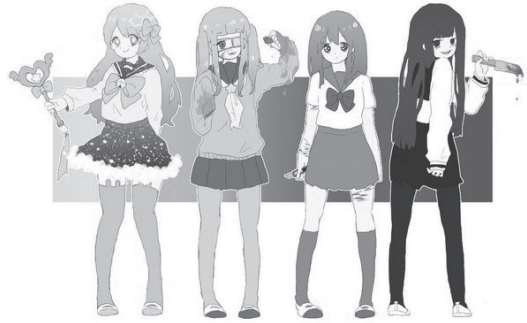


Figure 4: fashion example of *yumekawa*, *yamikawa*, *menhera*, *yandere* (from left)

We can see a new word, *yami-kawaii*. It is a compound that is consisted of *yami* (being sick) and *kawaii* (pretty, lovely). It is a kind of girls' fashion and it can be seen

as one of positive evaluation about sickness. *Yamikawa* fashion is obviously different from *menhera* fashion. *Menhera* girls are often straight-cut bangs with black hair, Gothic Lolita costume with appealing by absolute territory (exposing her skin between the top of knee-high socks and the hemline of skirt). On the other hand, *yamikawa* girls are often twin tails with showy colored hair, pastel or fancy color costume based on school sailor suit and equipping eye patches and sticking plasters as fashion items

As you noticed, the image of illness and sickness has already gone. Disease has been just a fashion property here. These characterizing is originally in two dimensions world, but it has been extended to the real world, even to their identity.

(9) If a *yami-kawa* girl uses twitter ... ,

"I'm tired to be alive ... ♡"

"Yes, let's die ♡"

(10) She shops at Harajuku store Nesin which sells pink eye patches and lots of clothes adorned with the aforementioned cynical Japanese messages like "Die!". Almost everything is pastel, not bloody or gory.



Figure 5: badges of sick and death, wrist slushing bracelet

“Menherachan” (Ezaki, 2013) is repeatedly introduced as a leader of the *yamikawa* boom. The main character can become a justice heroine by cutting her wrist. Of course, it is a kind of black humor, but there are no malicious feelings toward mental disease. On the contrary, the style of drawing is light like typical *yamikawa* fashion mentioned above.

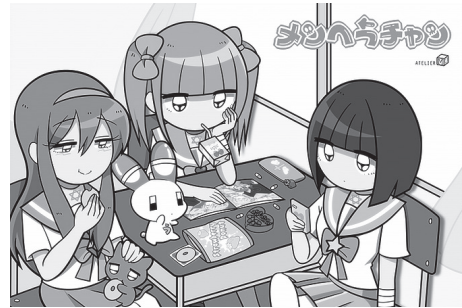


Figure 6: Menherachan

In the past few years, mental illness and wrist-cutting while hiding\* behind the surface of *kawaii* culture has become a huge problem in Japanese\* society. The main cause for this is that the majority of the population will doubt a person’s illness when the outer appearance doesn’t show any signs of suffering. This is the reason for why Ezaki’s works attracted the huge support of people who are into *kawaii* culture as they have to deal with the stereotype that someone with problems in life wouldn’t dress in a way that appears to be full of happiness, it makes the approach for help even harder. It sparked the birth of an aesthetics referred\* to as *Yamikawaii* (Sickly Cute)<sup>8</sup>. \*sic

This quotation is from an English webpage of “Menherachan”. Its justification must be added afterward, but we can see the transformation about the sight toward mental disease. *Menhera*, *Yandere* and the whole of mental diseases are accepted in Japanese society and arranged in the *kawaii* culture. This trend does not contain a kind of frivolity for disease; rather, it can be seen even as a deployed option in a series of symbolic *kawaii* enumeration. There may be no evaluations whether positive or negative.

Blame everything on you (*zenbu kimi no sei da*) is an idol group featuring *yamikawa*<sup>9</sup>. Their makeup is intentionally pale and sometimes makes dark rings under their eyes. The



Figure 7: Blame everything on you

word which hurt each member’s mind is set up at their profile, for example: “I don’t know what you are thinking of”, “You won’t come to school again?” The name of the online goods shop is *Codomomental Inc.* (Child’s mental Inc.). A photo of CD jacket is laying lots of photos of romanticist in Japanese literature who also dealt with the dark side of human mind. They call their fun as *wazurai-*

*san* (Mr. / Ms. ailment).

This is not just a black humor or a commercial aiming of a kind of sympathy by mental patients. The positive transformation of mental problems has been symbolized and used as one of the features among idol groups. There are too many rivals of idol groups so that the concept of the group is essential for taking spotlights. They are actually not in sick at all<sup>10</sup>, but the concept seems to be functioning.

After around 2010, mental disease is symbolized into *menhera*, *yandere* or *yamikawa*. I cannot conclude here whether it would be due to the acceptance of mental disease in our society or not, and whether the *kawaii* culture would swallow even disease. The transformation of the meaning of disease, however, has existed obviously, and it seems to be the beginning of the new age even about diseases in our society. In the last chapter, I try to explain the significance of this transformation in the contemporary society.

### **Conclusion: *la nouvelle histoire de la folie***

Foucault (1961) argued that modern society has succeeded to tame the madness under the name of psychiatry<sup>11</sup>. The revelation of Bicêtre hospital means to complete the structure of the elimination of mad persons. That is, mad person transformed into psychiatric patients and they newly enslaved to the medical gaze. There are many discussions in which the birth of psychiatry cannot be an object of criticism because they just tried to treat mad persons as human. The image of mental patients, however, has been set on the track of mad person under the process of modernity that has needed to marshal the rational from the other, i. e. each of the irrational. Mental disease alienates the patients out of industry so that they are irrational and should be cured.

Taking account of this point, the transformation that we saw in chapter 3 looks a sign of breaking the modern fence. Some arguments pointed out that the romanticism in Japanese literature frequently picked up invalid women, especially tuberculosis patients, and characterized them as the luscious<sup>12</sup>. There are also many works focusing mental problems in Japanese modern literature and the writers themselves are sometimes patients. Anyway, we can think that the disease including mental disease were not evaded as much as recent society. In this sense, the control that Foucault said has succeeded. The modern evasion to mental disease means the situation as if it ontologically disappeared. It is like a stiff shoulder, that is, many Japanese think that it is a bad condition to be cured, but it does not exist ontologically in some cultures.

Minority groups and eliminated people have been revealed one by one since the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mental patients have also been eliminated for over 200 years. The transformation of the evaluation to *menhera* must be unique social trend only for contemporary society. The works that I mentioned at the chapter 1 seems to lead the first step to illuminate the disease and the people. The creation of the terms such as *menhera* and *yandere* may bring the casual conceptualization in both of good and bad sense, and may take the restoration in the ontological significance as well.

The symbolization has the aspect that they underestimate the problem concerning with mental disease while a lot of people suffer from it, but also implies the aspect that they arrange the problem and the people on the usual options at the same time. That is, *kawaii* culture can be the screen of the real problem, but it also can break the morbid image. To deal with mental disease as like a catching cold means to erase the given border among us. The patients, of course, are allowed to tell their condition and their sense in everyday context. They are not the existence to be evaded and eliminated.

It is sociologically valuable that this transformation has taken place in the cultural dimension instead of political, because it can be a proof that culture has a power of transforming a concept or an idea in a society. Moreover, if I say that a young culture naturally accepts the object of evasion in the former era, is it a too over estimation?

Is it just a restoration of a minority property? Should we consider it as the new type of control, or at least one of social difficulties like bulimia societies? Will they be eliminated again when it comes down to it? This trend can be seen as an exploitation by capitalism with involving a certain domain<sup>13</sup>. It may be commercial promotions by the cosmetic industry and the fashion item industry and the idol business may also be related to it. Blame everything on you themselves don't have any prominent mental problems, but they pretend being sickness only on the surface just for the purpose of fashion. The trend is not only of the objects, for example, idols to watch and characters to draw in a manga, but also the practice of street girls. Nevertheless, it can be possible to consider that the self-expression is also constructed by a certain social power.

However, to line up *menhera*, *yandere* and *yamikawa* on the bulk of fashion options means the release of the image that was tied down to the morbid world of unhealthy. The discomfort about this phenomenon is of a similar kind to the embarrassment about the exoticism in fashion. Now, the unhealth mental status should be set on a kind of relativism like the cultural relativism in fashion. That is, the symbolization of mental disease has unconvinced the modern border both of Foucauldian and Marxist. To be confirmed here, it is important that they can

be listed on the fashion catalogue and comparable in a single criterion instead of that they are equivalent just as a symbol. Hence, to see *menhera*, *yandere* and *yamikawa* as *kawaii* implies the new idea: why the unhealthy is wrong or why mental patients are eliminated from the romantic world? It can be said that it is the beginning of the new history of mental diseases.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> menhera.jp (メンヘラ.jp) The site verifies the establishment of the birth of *menhera* by checking all the threads around them. <http://menhera.jp/975>

<sup>2</sup> Menhera.jp also reveals the oldest appearance of *menhera* was January 2002. See the same site.

<sup>3</sup> *Kawaii* is one of the most important words in Japanese subculture (net world and manga-anime-geeks culture). The original mean is pretty or lovely, but it is a very complex word, for example: “that old man is *kawaii*!” We can hear some derivatives e.g. *busa-kawaii* (ugry pretty) for a pug dog.

<sup>4</sup> *Aera* 2005/10/17, Asahishinbun publications, It can be said that the *tsundere*'s life style was fit to the women readers who were career-oriented. The main target of the magazine is business person with higher education. It is of sociological interest that a character to have roots in subculture is applied to the real life, but it will be laid off here.

<sup>5</sup> Kernberg (1970) explains that they split the ideal from the real and they devalue everything when they cannot plug the gap. The two aspects of the feature of narcissistic personal disorder is actually same, that is, devaluing of self and others. Kernberg, O. F. (1970). 'Factors in the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personalities.' in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 18:51-85, the American Psychoanalytic Association, Sage,

<sup>6</sup> Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Stanford University Press, p.114

<sup>7</sup> Giddens regards addiction and codependency as important on explaining the self and identity in contemporary society. See detail in *ibid.*, p.94

<sup>8</sup> <http://menhera-chan.tumblr.com/about>

<sup>9</sup> *Yamikawa* is translated into “morbidly cute” in the official home page of Blame everything on you. <http://kiminosei.com/>

<sup>10</sup> They themselves told it in *Yaguchi Mari's Tuesday the Night* (a program in Abema TV) 2016.7.5

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, M. (1961) *Histoire de la folie à l'âge Classique*, tr. by Tamura, H. Shinchosha, 1976

<sup>12</sup> Fukuda, M. (1995) *Kekkaku no bunkashi (Cultural History of Tuberculosis)*, The University of Nagoya Press

<sup>13</sup> It is inspired by *comme des garçon* controversy with Haniya, Y. and Yoshimoto, R.

This article was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> ISA forum, Wien (International Sociological Association, 2016.7) and this version is revised.

## Figure

Figure 1: Give my regards to Black Jack

<http://omoshiro-eikaiwa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/blackjack.jpg>

Figure 2: My partner got depression

<https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/71KHIV0nwtL.jpg>

Figure 3: comparison of *menhera* and *yandere*

revised from Kato, G (2016)

Figure 4: fashion example of *yumekawa*, *yamikawa*, *menhera*, *yandere*

<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CK1ZiIpVEAAfiVf.jpg>

Figure 5: badges of sick and death, wrist slushing bracelet

[https://cdn.fashionsnap.com/the-posts/images/2016/05/yami-kawaii\\_20160503\\_01.jpg](https://cdn.fashionsnap.com/the-posts/images/2016/05/yami-kawaii_20160503_01.jpg)

<https://img.fril.jp/img/23615315/m/58081803.jpg?1435833691>

Figure 6: Menherachan

<http://menherachan-official.tumblr.com/>

Figure 7: Blame everything on you

<http://kiminosei.com/>

## Discourse

(1) <http://mindhack2ch.com/archives/13080604.html>

(2) <http://laurier.press/i/E1481432570845>

(3) <http://uwakich.com/archives/44109651.html>

(4) <http://hayabusa.open2ch.net//test/read.cgi/news4vip/1398650098/>

(5) *ibid.*

(6) <http://seikatsu-hyakka.com/archives/3812>

(7) <http://blog.livedoor.jp/sslinks/archives/66140768.html>

(8) <http://dic.nicovideo.jp/b/a/%E3%83%A1%E3%83%B3%E3%83%98%E3%83%A9/421->

(9) <http://www.subcul-girl.com/entry/2015/07/28/191534>

(10) <https://www.fashionsnap.com/the-posts/2016-05-04/kawaii-menhera/>

