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GENDER-NEUTRAL NAMES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: REASONS AND MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THEIR CHOICE

This study explores the growing use of gender-neutral given names in contemporary Japan, focusing on the motivations and decision-making processes behind their selection. Based on a qualitative content analysis of name-selection narratives submitted to a popular parenting website over a fifteen-year period, the article examines whether gender neutrality is an explicit goal or an incidental outcome of naming practices. The findings reveal that while gender-neutral names are increasingly visible in rankings and media discourse, they are infrequently chosen with gender-related social concerns in mind. Only a minority of namegivers explicitly mentioned gender neutrality, and even fewer cited concerns such as inclusivity, flexibility in gender identity, or resistance to stereotypes. The study situates these findings within the evolving landscape of Japanese naming practices, arguing that gender-neutral naming often reflects broader shifts in naming conventions rather than a conscious engagement with gender issues. Nonetheless, such names contribute to a subtle reconfiguration of gender norms in everyday life.

Key words
contemporary Japan; gender-neutral names; motivations; naming practices

1. Introduction

Since the late 20th century and into the new millennium, Japanese given names have undergone significant changes and diversification (e.g., Kobayashi, 2009; Makino, 2012; Unser-Schutz, 2016; Barešová, 2016), driven by the rise of individualization, globalization, and growing attention to gender issues. The number of new and unique names has increased (Ogihara et al., 2015; Ogihara, 2021), featuring a wider range of sound patterns and kanji[1] than in earlier decades, and often lacking clear gender markers. While gender-specific names still predominate (Barešová – Nakaya – Matlach, 2024), gender-neutral names have been increasing, especially over the last decade. This rising trend is clearly reflected in annual baby name rankings. In the top 100 baby names (phonological forms) for boys and girls published online by Baby Calendar, 19 names appeared on both lists in

[1] Kanji are adapted Chinese characters used in writing Japanese. In addition to kanji, the Japanese language also uses two phonographic syllabaries, hiragana and katakana. These three scripts can be used to write Japanese names. The kanji permitted for use in names are limited to 2,999 (as of September 2024).

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2022 and again in 2023,[2] which is an unprecedented occurrence. Surveys on name selection conducted by the Japanese company Miki House (discussed further in Section 3) also indicate a growing interest in gender-neutral names. According to their 2022 survey, 10.7% of parents (78 out of 727) wanted to choose a gender-neutral name when naming their child. This represents an 8% increase from the 2017 survey (Miki House ed. team, 2022a).

This study is part of a larger research project exploring the recent phenomenon of gender-neutral names in Japan. While our previous studies focused on the linguistic characteristics and origins of gender-neutral names (Barešová – Nakaya, 2025), as well as the experiences and perceptions of their bearers (Barešová – Machů – Šturdík, 2025), this article specifically examines the reasons and motivations behind their choice, discussing them within the broader context of current naming practices. Our aim is to uncover what drives contemporary parents to select a gender-neutral name for their child. Through an analysis of name selection stories published on the Baby Calendar website, we investigate whether, and to what extent, the gender-neutral aspect is the primary goal for the choice of a gender-neutral name.

2. Literature review

The interplay between name selection and gender has been explored from a wide range of perspectives, using diverse methodological approaches such as sociological surveys (e.g., Leino, 2014; Tomanek, 2023), quantitative psychological studies (e.g., Alexander et al., 2021), and qualitative research (e.g., Obasi et al., 2019; Jiménez Segura, 2020). These studies highlight that, while naming is a universal practice, it is deeply embedded in cultural, linguistic, and gendered contexts. As a result, motivations behind name choices vary across societies, languages, and social settings. Some research has examined specific circumstances, such as naming preferences and choices among bicultural individuals (e.g., Cila et al., 2021) or renaming in the context of gender transition (e.g., Obasi et al., 2019), underscoring the topic's complexity and cultural embeddedness.

Names are not merely labels but active elements in the construction of gender. Pilcher (2016) introduced the concept of *embodied named identity*, arguing that names help constitute gender through their connection to the sexed body and their role in maintaining binary distinctions in everyday interactions. Building on this, Pilcher (2017) explores how given names participate in the performance of gender in everyday life and contribute to the reinforcement of gender inequalities.

[2] The rankings for both 2022 and 2023 are available at https://baby-calendar.jp/nazuke/.

Jiménez Segura (2020) similarly discusses the symbolic and social importance of name selection as a means of constructing and asserting gender identity. Alexander et al. (2021) have found that individuals with gender-specific names are more likely to exhibit behaviors aligned with traditional gender roles, suggesting that names may play a role in the internalization of gender norms.

The role of gender identity in naming becomes especially salient in contexts of transition or non-binary identification. Leino (2014) highlights the deep personal significance of name changes during gender transition and identifies various strategies individuals use to navigate potential conflicts between their personal, gender, and social identities. Obasi et al. (2019) further examine how transgender individuals select names that affirm their gender identity, often motivated by a need for self-expression and acknowledgment. These studies underscore how naming is not merely a passive reflection of identity but an active – and at times political – form of self-definition.

Naming practices are also shaped by broader socio-cultural structures that reflect and reinforce societal values. Šaffa, Štěrbová, and Prokop (2021) report gendered patterns in namesaking, with male and especially firstborn children more frequently named after their fathers, highlighting the cultural role of naming in reinforcing lineage and paternal investment. Offering a comparative perspective, Tomanek (2023) examines naming patterns in Poland, showing how gender and birth order influence parental choices and illustrating how naming decisions are embedded in wider social frameworks.

Taken together, these varied perspectives emphasize the complexity of naming as a social practice that intersects with gender, culture, and personal identity. Against this backdrop, gender-neutral naming practices offer a particularly compelling context for onomastic inquiry, as they navigate between traditional norms and emerging forms of gender expression.

3. Choosing a name in contemporary Japan

Given names in Japan are not chosen from a limited list but are created anew (Honda, 2005), with no legal restrictions regarding gender indication. The only limitation concerns the use of kanji (Unser-Schutz, 2019). The formation of a name is often a complex, multi-phase process involving phonological, semantic, orthographic, cultural, and legal considerations (Watanabe, 2005, p. 45). It consists of several steps with varying degrees of involvement and importance, carried out in various orders (Mori-Kolbe, 2020).

A key aspect of the usually lengthy and time-intensive process is the effort to choose a name for the often eagerly awaited child as carefully as possible. Many parents view a name as their child's first gift, deserving significant attention and care. This perspective is highlighted in naming guides published both in print and

online by influential companies (Barešová, 2016). Parents recognize that the chosen name will accompany their child throughout their life. It will form an integral part of their identity, as they will be addressed by it in society and navigate various social contexts with it.

When creating a name, namegivers consider a variety of practical concerns, personal meanings, and aspirations for the child's future. According to Tamago Club and Kurihara (2022), practical considerations include ease of use (such as forming nicknames or addressing the baby during pregnancy), pronunciation and spelling in English, originality, name length, and the readability and popularity of the chosen kanji. Personal motivations often involve references to the parents' past, the circumstances of the child's birth, or other family members. Aspirational elements reflect hopes for the child's future character or success and may include efforts to ensure a favorable fate through kanji selection and stroke count (*seimei handan*).

Empirical data further illustrate the factors that influence naming decisions. A 2022 online survey on name selection, conducted by the Japanese company Miki House among its registered users, revealed six factors that respondents[3] placed the most emphasis on. Each of these factors was chosen by more than 30% of respondents, while the remaining 12 options were selected by fewer than 20%. Interestingly, the most frequent factor, chosen by 59% of respondents, was the auspicious stroke count of the chosen kanji (*seimei handan*), followed by a pleasant sound (36.6%), reflecting aspirations for the child's future in the name (36.2%), avoiding so-called *kira-kira* or 'sparkly' names (36.2%), choosing easy-to-read kanji (33%) and ensuring the good visual appearance of the name (32%) (Miki House ed. team, 2022b). Avoiding *kira-kira* names and choosing easy-to-read kanji are closely related, as *kira-kira* names often feature rarely used kanji or kanji readings, unusual kanji combinations, or non-standard kanji-sound relationships (e.g., Ōno, 2013, pp. 145–149; Itō, 2015). However, the pursuit of an auspicious kanji stroke count, the most frequently noted factor, can easily lead to an overly unique name, as namegivers may replace an originally intended kanji with another that has a more favorable stroke count but is rarely used or does not closely match the intended sound.

During the name selection process, many namegivers – typically the child's parents (Unser-Schutz, 2019; Barešová – Janda, 2023) – consult a range of sources for inspiration and guidance while keeping up with current trends. Both printed and online guides provide extensive advice on how to choose the right name,

[3] The total number of responses to this question was 727 (only from respondents with a child aged 0), out of a total of 2,626 respondents for the entire survey.

including name lists, kanji meanings and images, stroke counts, and their interpretations. Despite the growing interest in gender-neutral names, printed naming guides remain primarily focused on names for girls and boys, although many names can be found under both categories (Unser-Schutz, 2025). In contrast, gender-neutral names are more prominently featured and discussed on parenting and baby name websites (e.g., Baby Calendar, HugKum, Mamari, and Tomonite[4]),[5] which often highlight them explicitly, as well as on other online platforms such as lifestyle magazines and blogs (e.g., Noel).[6]

In these online sources, gender-neutral names (in Japanese mainly referred to as *chūseitekina namae* 'gender-neutral names', *jendāresuna namae* / *jendāresu nēmu* 'genderless names', or *jendāfurīna namae* 'gender-free names') are presented as names that can be given to both boys and girls without feeling unnatural or suggesting a specific gender (see also Barešová – Nakaya, 2025). They are described as distinctive, unconventional, and modern – promoting social adaptability and easing integration across gender lines (e.g., Noel ed. team, 2019). They are also valued for their aesthetic appeal and ease of pronunciation (e.g., Hirota, 2022). Additional advantages include the ability to choose them early in pregnancy, before the child's sex is known, allowing parents to begin using the name immediately, avoid later changes, and foster a bond with both the name and the child.

The various benefits associated with choosing a gender-neutral name are often accompanied by suggestions on how to balance phonological neutrality with visual gender cues, if desired. Parents are reminded that they can make a gender-neutral name lean more toward either boys or girls through their choice of kanji.[7] This allows for names that are neutral in sound but convey masculinity or femininity in their graphic form. Such names are referred to as "gender-neutral names (suitable) for boys" and "gender-neutral names (suitable) for girls" (see also Barešová – Nakaya, 2025).

Overall, the diverse motivations, constraints, and cultural specificities reveal how multifaceted naming practices in Japan are today and provide an important context for understanding the narratives analyzed in the following sections.

4 Formerly Mamadays.

5 https://baby-calendar.jp; https://hugkum.sho.jp/; https://mamari.jp; https://tomonite.com.

6 https://noel-media.jp/.

7 A single phonological form of a name can often be written using various kanji. As a result, it is possible to create names that are gender-neutral in their phonological form but gender-specific in their graphic form. The graphic form of a name can also frequently be read in multiple ways, allowing for names that are gender-neutral in their graphic form but gender-specific in their phonological form. Additionally, there are truly gender-neutral names that do not indicate gender in either their phonological or graphic forms. These websites often encourage the use of the first type.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring, 2014) to examine the name-selection stories published on the parenting website Baby Calendar. The research methods included data sampling and thematic coding to explore motivations for choosing a gender-neutral name.

4.1 Data

The name selection stories were contributed by namegivers, typically mothers, as part of the *Akachan no Nazuke Episōdo Taishō* (Baby Name-Selection Story Campaign). These narratives provide valuable insights into the motivations and considerations behind naming choices. They serve as a useful resource for understanding the various factors namegivers take into account, including gender or, more specifically, gender neutrality.

These data also have, however, their limitations. The stories are crafted in accordance with the campaign instructions and reflect a particular form of self-presentation. Many are written retrospectively for this purpose and are intentionally stylized to make an impression. Others are brief and straightforward, suggesting that, for some parents, the goal is not solely to impress, but rather to share their experiences. One significant limitation of using this data is the inability to seek clarification from namegivers, particularly when their reasoning is unclear or incomplete. Additionally, when multiple factors influence a name choice, parents may mention only some, leaving other reasons unexpressed, even if they played a role in the decision.

The dataset comprises 15,058 baby names and the stories behind their selection, contributed by parents of children born between 2008 and 2022. Gender-neutral names were selected based on the following two criteria adapted from Lieberson, Dumais, and Baumann (2000) and Seguin, Julien, and Zhang (2021): the frequency of occurrence and the proportion of girls and boys given each name. Specifically, we selected phonological forms with at least an average occurrence and a gender ratio equal to or lower than 4:1. The selected names include:

> *Aki*, *Ao*, *Aoba*, *Aoi*, *Asahi*, *Chiaki*, *Chihiro*, *Haru*, *Haruhi*, *Hinata*, *Iori*, *Ito*, *Kaede*, *Kanade*, *Mahiro*, *Mikoto*, *Mitsuki*, *Mizuki*, *Nagi*, *Nagisa*, *Nao*, *Natsu*, *Natsuki*, *Rei*, *Rion*, *Ruka*, *Sena*, *Shiki*, *Shion*, *Sora*, *Toa*, *Towa*, *Tsubasa*, *Uta*, *Yū*, *Yura*, *Yūri*, *Yuzuki* (ゆずき), and *Yuzuki* (ゆづき).[8]

[8] The phonological form *Yuzuki* is represented in *hiragana* (used in Japanese to indicate pronunciation) as ゆずき and ゆづき in the dataset. The structure of the former is *yuzu-ki* (e.g., 柚希), while the latter is *yu-zuki* (e.g., 結月). Both variants are pronounced in the same way in modern Japanese. The same applies to *Mizuki*, but only the *hiragana* representation みずき had a balanced gender distribution in our dataset.

The dataset contained 1,571 name-selection stories corresponding to these 39 distinct phonological forms. A keyword-based sampling strategy was applied to filter relevant stories, using 17 terms related to gender, gender neutrality and unisex naming (e.g., ジェンダー [‘gender’], 性別 [‘sex’], 中性 [‘gender neutrality’], ユニセックス [‘unisex’], 男の子でも女の子でも [‘whether a boy or a girl’], etc.). This process yielded 179 potentially relevant stories. The remaining stories were excluded, despite involving gender-neutral names, as they did not include any of the keywords. The following two examples illustrate excluded cases. Both describe the selection of the same name, assigned to a girl (Example 1) and a boy (Example 2):

(1) “I wanted a pretty, single-kanji name that would not be common. After discussing it with my husband, we decided on Ao 蒼 [‘blue’].” (Mother of *Ao* 蒼, girl, 2009)

(2) “Since our family name includes 海 [‘sea’], we named our son Ao [‘blue’] to match our family name and also because it is my and my husband’s favorite color. Blue (蒼), refreshing. We included a wish for him to grow up to be someone who cherishes people around him.” (Mother of *Ao* 蒼, boy, 2014)

Although *Ao* is a gender-neutral name, these stories were excluded because the parents’ explanations did not mention gender-related considerations.

Following the initial keyword-based filtering, a subsequent manual review led to the exclusion of an additional 54 stories, which, despite containing the relevant keywords, lacked explicit references to gender neutrality, as in the following example:

(3) “As a couple who loves music, we always wanted to include the kanji 奏 [‘play an instrument’] in our child’s name, whether it was a boy or a girl. We chose it with the hope that our child would shape their future brightly and energetically, like the sun!” (Mother of *Hinata* 陽奏, boy, 2014)

The mother explains that they wanted to use a particular kanji regardless of their child’s gender, but this does not necessarily indicate an intention to choose a gender-neutral name. Although implicit gender-neutral considerations may have influenced this decision, the analysis focused solely on explicitly stated motivations.

The final dataset comprised 125 narratives, varying in length from 43 to 842 characters.[9] While some parents provided detailed explanations, others offered only brief justifications.

[9] It should be noted that the character count refers to Japanese script, where a single grapheme may represent an entire word. For example, when transcribed into the Latin alphabet using the Hepburn romanization system, the 43-character narrative contains 91 characters (without spaces).

The examples, including those in this section, used to illustrate the discussed issues, have been translated from Japanese while preserving their original form (including factual and other inaccuracies). They have been abbreviated as necessary to include only the passages relevant to this study.

4.2 Analysis

The 125 selected stories were analyzed using thematic analysis with an inductive coding approach. Coding was carried out manually, without predefined categories, allowing recurring themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data. Each story was closely examined to identify the circumstances and/or motivations that led to the choice of a gender-neutral name. The initial phase of open coding involved labeling key phrases and patterns indicative of these underlying factors. In the subsequent axial coding phase, the codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, enabling a structured interpretation of the data.

To enhance reliability, both authors independently coded the stories, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. A native Japanese speaker was consulted when necessary to ensure the accuracy in thematic categorization.

Two overarching categories emerged from the analysis: (1) gender-neutral names as a consequence of the name-selection process and (2) gender-neutral names as a deliberate and conscious choice. The first category includes cases where the gender-neutral outcome was incidental rather than intentional. Within this category, we identified three main subtypes: (a) instances where parents had pre-planned a name regardless of the child's gender, (b) cases where they had pre-planned a name intended for a specific gender but gave it to a child of the opposite gender, and (c) situations where a temporary or working name ended up becoming the final name.

The second category comprises cases in which the choice of a gender-neutral name was intentional. Motivations varied in this case and can be grouped into three main subcategories: (a) cases where the choice was motivated by uncertainty about the child's sex prior to birth, (b) cases where the decision reflected broader social or personal beliefs related to gender and gender identity, and (c) cases where the names of siblings or other family members played a key role in shaping the decision.

These subcategories are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive but aim to capture the most commonly observed motivations, considerations, and decision-making pathways. Name selection is often complex, and many parents combine multiple factors in their decision. Consequently, some cases were placed in more than one category. The frequencies reported in the Results section should therefore be viewed as indicative rather than definitive measures of how common certain motivations are.

5. Results

In the overwhelming majority (1,446 out of 1,571) of the *nazuke episōdo* for the 39 selected gender-neutral phonological forms, the namegivers did not explicitly mention or comment on the gender-neutral aspect of the chosen name. They chose the name with various criteria in mind and for various reasons (see examples in section 4.1), but gender neutrality was not among the considerations mentioned. It can be assumed that the parents either did not consider this aspect necessary to mention or, in some cases, might not have even realized the name is used for both boys and girls. Their goal was to choose the best possible name for their child, and the fact that a gender-neutral name was the result was a confluence of various factors (e.g., name popularity, kanji semantics, preferred name length, etc.).

The gender-neutral or unisex aspect of the chosen name was explicitly mentioned by the namegivers in 125 stories. This section presents the findings from their analysis organized into the categories outlined in section 4.2.

5.1 Gender-neutral names as a consequence of the name selection process

Forty-eight stories (38.4%) revealed that the namegivers arrived at a gender-neutral name based on circumstances that can be divided into three groups.

5.1.1 Pre-planned choice of a name regardless of the child's gender

The most frequent scenario (33 cases, 26.4%) was that one or both parents had a favorite name (as in Examples 4 and 5) or a specific idea for a name (or a form of diminutive/nickname) for their future child, based on various reasons (e.g., a hobby, a favorite sportsman, a singer, a specific song, a fictional character, etc.). We also include cases where parents had a name come to mind or appear in a dream. When expecting a child or when the child was born, they wished to use this name, sometimes only making partial modifications (e.g., in its graphic form). Thus, these are cases where parents did not intentionally choose a gender-neutral name from the outset but rather had the name emerge as their desired choice for their future child for various reasons, regardless of the child's gender.

(4) "My husband and I loved watching F1. Before our child was born, we had decided that whether it was a boy or a girl, we would name the child Sena after the F1 racer Ayrton Senna. Since the baby was a girl, we chose 星愛 ['star' + 'love']. We found this kanji combination in a book and fell in love with it at first sight." (Mother of *Sena* 星愛, girl, 2011)

(5) "Since we were dating, my husband had always said that if we had a child, whether it be a boy or a girl, he would like to use this name [Tsubasa 翼 'wings']. He loves aviation-related things and studied that field […].

> At first, I thought to myself, 'It sounds like a name for a host in a club, so that's a bit…' However, when my son was born, I felt that it perfectly aligned with my own feelings – 'We want you to fly freely without being bound by your parents' wishes, and we will always support you' – so we decided on this name." (Mother of *Tsubasa* 翼, boy, 2021)

Gender neutrality does not appear to be a primary consideration in these instances. However, it can be assumed, even if not explicitly reflected in the stories, that the parents subsequently considered the suitability of the name for a child of that gender and ensured that nothing inherently prevented its use.

5.1.2 Pre-planned choice of a name for a particular gender

Another situation was that the parents had a preselected name for a child of a specific gender (10 cases, 8%). In these cases, the parents revealed in the stories that they had selected the name because they believed or were convinced that a child of that gender would be born, or they desired or anticipated a child of that gender (Example 6). However, during pregnancy or after birth, they found that the child was of the opposite gender. Some parents reported that at that moment they began thinking about a new name, but either they could not come up with another one, or they were not satisfied with the suggestions they considered. They found it difficult to let go of the name they had initially thought of because they had grown attached to it during pregnancy while using it to address the baby. They therefore decided to use this name unchanged or with partial modifications (Example 7).

(6) "We originally intended the name for a boy. The primary reason was our admiration for Ray Allen, one of the best three-point shooters in the NBA, and took Rei [Ray] from his name. We then searched for kanji and found 伶, which also has the reading 'wazaogi' and means 'a performer who entertains with amusing skills, singing and dancing to soothe the hearts of gods and people'. We were deeply moved by this meaning and decided to use the name for our daughter as well." (Mother of *Rei* 伶, girl, 2013)

(7) "My husband had always hoped for a girl. When I was pregnant, he was convinced it was a girl and wanted to name her Yuzuki because he liked the sound of yuzu. During the ultrasound, when we saw it was a boy, he was genuinely shocked […]. He then suggested we save the name for our second child if it were a girl […]. But we didn't know if we would have a second child, and even if we did, it might be another boy. […] We had already been calling the baby Yuzu, so in the end, I decided that our child would be Yuzuki. […]" (Mother of *Yuzuki* 橙生, boy, 2018)

Even in these cases, it can be concluded that the parents were not primarily concerned with the gender-neutral nature of the name. It is reasonable to assume that only during the process did the parents eventually realize that there was likely nothing fundamentally preventing the use of the chosen name for a child of the opposite gender, or they recognized its gender-neutral character and thus its suitability for children of both genders.

5.1.3 A gender-neutral name based on a temporary name

This third group comprises stories in which the gender-neutral name arose from addressing the baby during pregnancy (5 cases, 4%).[10] These are cases where parents either directly adopted the form of the temporary name for the resulting name or created it based on this form. In the context of assigning a temporary name to an expectant baby, the Japanese term *taiji nēmu* is employed. This is typically a temporary means of addressing a child during pregnancy until its sex is known. Hence, it usually represents a gender-neutral designation, often taking the form of a nickname but also occasionally a shortened version of an existing name. While a temporary name in the form of a nickname (e.g., *Mame-chan* – 'Bean', *Chibi-chan* – 'Little One') will be replaced by a regular name once the parents learn the child's sex, a diminutive form of a name can become the resultant name. In four of the five recorded cases, the gender-neutral names *Haru*, *Natsu*, and *Natsuki* originated from temporary names consisting of *haru* ('spring') / *natsu* ('summer') and a hypocoristic suffix (e.g., *-chan*, *-rin*, *-tan*), motivated by the expected time of year for the child's birth. Parents either liked the temporary name so much that they did not wish to change it and kept it as it was (*Haru* and *Natsu* in examples 8 and 9), or they complemented it with an end syllable (*Natsuki*), and decided on its graphic form.

(8) "It was four months after we got married that we found out I was pregnant with our first child. From that point on, we talked about the baby every night. […] During this time, we started using the temporary name Haru. We liked its warm and gentle sound, and one of the deciding factors was that, since we didn't yet know the baby's sex, it was a name that could be

[10] In the analyzed stories, we identified an additional 17 instances where the final name was also chosen based on a temporary name. However, in these stories, the unisex or gender-neutral aspect of the choice was not explicitly mentioned, and therefore, these stories were not included in this group. The reasons for the name choice were identical to those given in the five stories (e.g., the temporary name was determined based on the season in which the child was to be born, the parents had become accustomed to the temporary name and could no longer abandon it, etc.).

used regardless […]. However, since we viewed this name as temporary, we started considering other names around the ninth month of pregnancy. […] [I]n the end, we agreed that Haru, which we had been using all along, felt the most fitting. […]" (Mother of *Haru* 遥, boy, 2020)

(9) "[…] When we didn't yet know the sex of our baby during the pregnancy, my husband suggested choosing a temporary nickname. Since the baby was due in the summer, we quickly decided on Natchan [natsu 'summer' + diminutive suffix -chan]. As the due date approached and we began to think about a proper name, we decided to each suggest names that caught our interest. However, after calling the baby Natchan for more than half a year, we had grown fond of it and decided to choose a name that could be shortened to Natchan. We decided on Natsu ['summer']. […]" (Mother of *Natsu* 那津, girl, 2020)

As in the other two groups, gender neutrality was not a deliberate goal at the outset, but emerged naturally from the circumstances, with the temporary names ultimately taking on lasting significance and becoming the child's official name.

5.2 Gender-neutral names as a deliberate and conscious choice

In 77 cases (61.6%), parents intentionally chose a gender-neutral name. A larger portion (43) provided a specific reason (see subsections below), while others simply expressed a preference for a gender-neutral name without explaining why (34), as illustrated in Examples 10 and 11.

(10) "My husband's name is Yūta, and my name is Eri, so we combined our names to name our child Yūri. From the very beginning, we had talked about wanting a gender-neutral name, so it was perfect. Our child looks just like the two of us and is very fair-skinned, so a gender-neutral name feels just right." (Mother of *Yūri* 優李, boy, 2017)

(11) "I wanted a gender-neutral name, but not too sparkly. I liked the sound of the name, and the fact that it had a fortunate number of strokes together with the family name was also a deciding factor!" (Mother of *Iori* 伊織, boy, 2018)

The reasons for the deliberate choice of a gender-neutral name mentioned in the stories can be divided into three main groups.

5.2.1 A choice motivated by uncertainty about the child's sex

The most common reason, mentioned 26 times (20.8%), is that parents chose a gender-neutral name because they did not know the sex of their child at the time

they were thinking about names (Example 12). This could be because they chose not to find out, it was not possible to determine during ultrasound examinations for most or all of the pregnancy, or the maternity hospital did not disclose it. In some cases, parents knew the sex but wished for a child of the opposite sex and still hoped that it could come true (Example 13). Alternatively, there are instances where parents knew the sex of the child but opted for a name that could be used for both a girl and a boy, just in case (Example 14).

(12) "Until birth, we couldn't determine the child's sex, so we looked for a name that could be used for both a boy and a girl. Yūri was our first choice. Grandpa examined the stroke count of various kanji and provided several options. Then, our baby was born – a girl. We decided on the name 悠梨, which combines the meanings of being gentle and having a broad heart. We thought it suited her best, and it had the most favorable stroke count." (Mother of *Yūri* 悠梨, girl, 2008)

(13) "Even though we knew it was a boy when he was still in my belly, my husband was hoping for a girl, so we decided on the name Sora ['sky'], which would be fine even if a girl was born. When the baby was born, it was indeed a boy (lol). We kept the reading of the name the same but chose kanji [meaning 'universe'], which conveyed our hopes for him to become an amazing person like an astronaut. As fans of Takarazuka, we also took inspiration from the Soragumi [Cosmos Troupe]." (Mother of *Sora* 宙, boy, 2010)

(14) "When we were told our child was likely a girl, we decided to think about names together. Our only agreement was to choose a name that would still be suitable if, by any chance, the child turned out to be a boy. One day, when we decided to share the names we had each thought of, we both came up with Natsuki […]" (Mother of *Natsuki* 夏葵, girl, 2011)

For these parents, gender-neutral names served as a flexible solution in the face of uncertainty, allowing them to prepare for either possibility without compromising on name selection.

5.2.2 A choice motivated by social aspects related to gender and gender issues

The second most represented group comprises 11 instances (8.8%) where the deliberate choice of a gender-neutral name was driven by considerations of specific social aspects related to gender and gender issues. Specifically, it was the parents' desire to choose a gender-unencumbered name. Among the reasons given are the arguments that, in today's society, gender is no longer a binary category. In this context, parents considered the possibility that their child might feel differently

about their gender in adulthood (Example 15). They also considered the advantage of a gender-neutral name that would not have to be changed in a complicated way (Example 16). It was also argued that a gender-neutral name can serve as a measure against social or professional discrimination based on gender (Example 17).

(15) "We aimed for a gender-neutral name since we did not know what gender our child would identify with in the future and also sought a name that would be familiar not only in Japan but also worldwide, as we hope our child will travel the world. Ruka [Luke] is the name of a saint who wrote the Bible, making it a frequently used name in Christian communities. […] As for the kanji, my husband chose 瑠, which represents something precious, and I chose 奏, which expresses determination to see things through to the end. […]" (Mother of *Ruka* 瑠奏, boy, 2020)

(16) "We named our child Natsuki 夏葵 because she was born in the summer when sunflowers bloom [夏 means 'summer' and 葵 is used in 向日葵 'sunflower'] […]. Although Natsuki-chan is a girl, there may come a time in her life when she wants to live as a boy. To make it easy for her to continue using her name even if she becomes a boy, we chose a gender-neutral name." (Mother of *Natsuki* 夏葵, girl, 2021)

(17) "[…] My husband decided on the name, but no matter how much I asked about its origin, he […] wouldn't tell me. In the meantime, we safely celebrated our child's half-birthday. When looking back at photos my husband said, 'You know, about Aoi… I wanted to give a gender-neutral name to avoid any discrimination based on gender in the future, like with jobs and such. […]" (Mother of *Aoi* 葵大, boy, 2019)

Some parents also used gender-neutral names as a way to challenge conventional ideas about femininity and masculinity. Their aim might have been to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes or to encourage more flexible expressions of gender, as illustrated in Examples 18 and 19.

(18) "My spouse and I love airplanes, so this name [Tsubasa 翼 'wings'] came to mind. Not only does it literally mean that we want our child to fly out into the world […], but it is also used as a metaphor for the means and energy to achieve dreams and hopes. […] Also, it is a good name for both boys and girls, and we want our girl to live with a broad perspective, free from being confined to feminine stereotypes. The element 異 ['different' or 'unconventional'] in the name also reflects our wish for her to live true to herself without compromising her individuality. […]" (Mother of *Tsubasa* 翼, girl, 2018)

(19) "Since our child was born in early summer, we included 夏 ['summer']. The thoughts behind the kanji 楓 ['maple'] are that on hot summer days,

a pleasant breeze can be felt by those around, and in autumn, the brightly colored maple leaves bring healing to people's hearts. We wished for our child to lead a colorful life, like a maple tree that provides such healing. Rather than a name that is distinctly masculine or feminine, we wanted to express a unisex feel, which was also a key point. […]" (Mother of *Kaede* 夏楓, boy, 2020)

These stories illustrate how some parents used gender-neutral names to navigate evolving societal understandings of gender, demonstrating a commitment to openness, inclusivity, and their child's future autonomy.

5.2.3 A choice motivated by the names of siblings or other family members

The third group includes eight cases (6.4%) where the choice of a gender-neutral name is due to an older sibling or someone else in the family already having a gender-neutral name (Examples 20 and 21). However, these cases could also be categorized as unjustified choices of a gender-neutral name, as the reason for choosing a gender-neutral name for the older sibling is not further explained.

(20) "Since this is our second child, my partner and I decided that, just like with our first, it would be good to choose a name with a gender-neutral sound. I liked the sound of Natsuki and initially thought of using 夏 [*natsu* 'summer'] because the baby was expected to be born in July. However, after searching for kanji with good stroke counts, we discovered 菜月 [*na* 'rapeseed' + *tsuki* 'moon']. Prioritizing the child's happiness over our personal preferences, we decided to choose the name with the best stroke count […]" (Mother of *Natsuki* 菜月, girl, 2018)

(21) "My husband has a gender-neutral name, so he wanted to give our child a similar name and suggested Kaede. However, the kanji 楓 ['maple'] had an unfavorable stroke count, so we chose 佳楓 instead. Since boys rarely change their surnames, we carefully considered the stroke count and the sound, and we are very satisfied with the name we worked so hard to decide on. […]" (Mother of *Kaede* 佳楓, boy, 2011)

Finally, in the analyzed stories, some parents also shared their experiences with the chosen name or the opinions and impressions of their family and surroundings. The stories show, for example, that the parents themselves did not realize certain aspects of the name when they initially came up with it. However, later they received feedback from those around them, which included opinions that the name is more suited to a girl or a boy or that it is an unusual name. Negative experiences shared include instances of gender misidentification (Example 22), for example, in the hospital. Some parents regret their choice in retrospect, as they initially did not consider the name gender-neutral, only realizing this later (Example 23).

(22) "We considered names with the same number of strokes as his older brother's. There were several options, but since his brother's name also contains 弓, and the name Chihiro has a soft sound when spoken, we decided on it. As we anticipated, he is being mistaken for a girl, so when we go out, I dress him in blue, navy, or black clothes…" (Mother of *Chihiro* 千弥, boy, 2010)

(23) "[…]. When my husband went to buy a book of names, he ignored my advice to get one that included both boys' and girls' names and bought a book for girls' names only. The image we had in mind was 'a person with a broad, generous, and warm heart'. From that book, we considered the stroke count and other factors. Ultimately, we combined 遥 [which evokes an image of 'broad' and 'generous'] and 陽 [which evokes an image of warmth] to create the name Haruhi. Later, we heard that this name is more commonly used for boys, and we wondered if it wasn't a bad idea." (Mother of *Haruhi* 遥陽, girl, 2011)

These retrospective accounts highlight how perceptions of gender neutrality can shift over time, sometimes leading to regret or unintended consequences, particularly when social responses diverge from parental expectations.

6. Discussion

It may seem surprising at first sight that most stories concerning gender-neutral names do not explicitly mention the aspect of gender neutrality. When choosing a name for their child, parents usually think of it as being for a child of a particular gender, a practice that reflects the gendered expectations built into naming conventions (Pilcher, 2016; 2017). With that in mind, they do not often consider, or at least it is not evident from their name-selection story, whether the name is also suitable for a child of the other gender. This does not necessarily mean they are unaware of it; it is simply outside their focus. Nonetheless, given the increasing diversity of contemporary names, including many that are new or unconventional (Ogihara et al., 2015; Ogihara, 2021; Unser-Schutz, 2015; 2016), it is possible that some parents are genuinely unaware of the gender-neutral potential of a name, a point revealed in some of the name-selection stories. Their perceptions are shaped by personal context, past encounters with the name, and the information available to them at the time of naming.

Naming resources may also contribute to this lack of recognition. Baby naming books do not usually have a category of gender-neutral names. They discuss them to some extent and provide examples in the introduction, but actual names are usually listed separately for boys and girls, and gender-neutral names are included in these two categories (Unser-Schutz, 2025). This binary organization echoes what

Pilcher (2016) describes as the embeddedness of naming within sexed and binary gender systems. The popular Tamahiyo baby-naming guides (*Tamahiyo akachan no shiawase namae jiten* [The Tamahiyo happy baby names dictionary]), which have been published annually since 2003 and are considered particularly influential with expectant parents (Kobayashi, 2009), even feature separate gendered editions (Unser-Schutz, 2025). Consequently, one might not even recognize the gender-neutral aspect of a name, as illustrated by example 23 (*Haruhi*) in 5.2.3.

As mentioned in Section 3, parenting and baby name websites pay more attention to gender-neutral names, offering advice on their selection and providing lists of such names. However, similar to baby naming books, one may unintentionally choose a gender-neutral name when searching on these websites, as they often list names in various thematic categories; for example, names such as *Aoi* and *Kaede*, featured on gender-neutral name lists, are also frequently categorized as traditional or retro Japanese names for girls.

Several stories revealed that parents sometimes only realized the gender-neutral aspect of the chosen name later in the decision-making process. For some, the gender-neutral quality was not the primary reason for selecting the name but became an added benefit discovered after the choice had been made.

Only a small number of parents who explicitly mentioned choosing a gender-neutral name for their child cited social reasons as part of their motivation. It can be assumed, however, that many of those who explicitly stated they wanted a gender-neutral name but did not provide further justification chose a gender-neutral name for these reasons. From the way the information is presented in the name-selection stories (e.g., "We like gender-neutral names…", "I insisted on a gender-neutral name…", "a gender-neutral name was the point…"), it can be assumed that the gender-neutral aspect of the name is important to those namegivers, that it has some added value for them, and that they see it as a benefit for their child's life.

The growing visibility of gender-neutral names in popular discourse and online media also suggests that broader social trends may be playing a background role in shaping parental preferences. Online sources often present these names as part of a wider cultural shift, linking their popularity to the rise of jendāresu ('genderless') or jendāfurī ('gender-free') values and increasing public interest in gender issues (e.g., HugKum ed. team, 2023; Baby Calendar ed. team, 2021). Some even refer to global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, which promotes gender equality at all levels of society (Baby Calendar ed. team, 2021; see also Noel ed. team, 2019). These sources emphasize that moving beyond rigid gender stereotypes – a shift visible not only in naming but also in fashion, cosmetics, and interpersonal relationships – may influence parents' choices.

While such broader cultural narratives may form part of the background, the most commonly stated reasons for choosing a gender-neutral name in the analyzed stories were far more pragmatic. The most frequently mentioned reason was

uncertainty about the child's sex at the time of naming. Traditionally, names were chosen after the child's birth. This practice allowed parents to consider various factors such as the child's sex, the circumstances surrounding the birth, and even the time of birth, which holds significance in astrological beliefs (Kida, 2002). Due to advancements in prenatal care, contemporary parents usually start preparing for their child's arrival, including selecting a name, as soon as they learn the baby's sex. Many parents begin even earlier, compiling a list of favorite names for a boy and a girl. They also tend to choose a temporary name by which they can address and refer to the child and establish a psychological bond with them. Some parents, as recommended by the above-mentioned websites and evidenced by the name-selection stories, opt for a gender-neutral name that can serve as a permanent choice from an early stage.

The desire to address the child before birth and build a relationship with them makes the phonological form of a name the primary consideration (Kobayashi, 2009). This approach to name selection, along with its advantages and the key role of a name's sound, is presented on parenting websites and in baby name guides. As some examples in Section 5 illustrate, it is not uncommon for only the phonological form of a name to be gender-neutral, allowing parents to address the child early in pregnancy, while the graphic form, chosen later, may be gender-specific.

The choice of a gender-neutral name, or one more commonly associated with the opposite gender, may also be driven by a desire for distinctiveness (Barry – Harper, 1982). These names stand out because their sound differs from typically masculine or feminine names, which often have gender-specific endings. Their uniqueness remains, even when these names become more frequently used or rank highly on baby name lists, as they continue to differ from gender-specific names. Distinctiveness can be achieved in various ways. In addition to selecting an original name with an uncommon phonological or graphic form, it can also be achieved by choosing a name more commonly associated with the opposite gender. According to some parenting websites (e.g., Hirota, 2022), this option can create a 'cool' effect for girls and a 'cute' or 'kind' effect for boys.

Finally, the rise of gender-neutral names is also driven by their fashionable appeal. As explained above, popularity and uniqueness or distinctiveness are not necessarily contradictory. Many of the names we identified as gender-neutral rank among the top 100 baby names for both boys and girls. Their popularity is largely influenced by well-known figures: celebrities, public figures, and fictional characters from manga, anime, video games, etc. People who follow trends are influenced by the popularity of these names, including gender-neutral ones, and often choose them for their children, which in turn contributes to their continued spread in society.

In summary, while gender-neutral names are increasingly present in modern naming practices, they are often chosen for reasons not directly related to gender

neutrality. Their selection is influenced by broader trends in name diversity and personal preferences rather than being a direct response to societal developments concerning gender. However, as awareness of gender issues continues to grow, their impact on name selection may become more apparent in the future. This is already somewhat evident, as most of the analyzed name-selection stories that mention gender issues come from the most recent years.

7. Conclusion

Today's naming landscape reflects both continuity and change. While the number of names used for both boys and girls has grown in recent decades – as seen in popular name rankings and everyday practice – this trend appears to be driven more by evolving naming conventions, such as increasing name diversity and the desire for originality, than by a conscious move toward gender neutrality.

The analysis of name-selection stories confirmed that namegivers consider a wide variety of factors when choosing a name, as described in Section 3. Yet gender neutrality did not emerge as a prominent motivation for selecting the names identified in this study as gender-neutral. Only eight percent of parents explicitly mentioned gender neutrality, and in fewer than five percent of cases was it a deliberate choice – most often motivated by the desire to choose a name before knowing the child's sex.

Overall, gender-related social factors were rarely the main reasons motivating namegivers to choose a gender-neutral name. Instead, the selection of one of the 39 gender-neutral phonological forms focused on in this study was typically driven by other motivations, such as the name's sound, novelty, fashionability and other considerations aligned with parents' personal preferences and expectations.

Even so, the growing societal awareness of gender-related issues – as reflected in the media, parenting websites, and public discussions of contemporary naming trends – forms a meaningful part of the broader context in which gender-neutral names are increasingly appreciated. These names are often associated with values such as equality, inclusivity, and individuality, which may resonate with parents even if not explicitly acknowledged. As seen in some stories, parents who later recognized the gender-neutral aspect of a chosen name sometimes mentioned it as an added benefit or a secondary justification for their decision.

In this sense, gender-neutral naming is not necessarily a conscious rejection of gender norms, but rather one of the subtle ways in which everyday practices reflect and contribute to broader social shifts. While naming does not directly oppose traditional gender conventions, it does reveal how those conventions are being negotiated, reinterpreted, and occasionally softened – often without conscious intent. As Pilcher (2017) argues, gender is something we do in everyday life, and naming is part of that ongoing process. The growing use of gender-neutral

names thus reflects a gradual shift in how people think about gender – one that unfolds through ordinary decisions shaped by personal values, lived experiences, and practical considerations.

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GENDEROVĚ NEUTRÁLNÍ JMÉNA V SOUČASNÉM JAPONSKU: DŮVODY A MOTIVACE PRO JEJICH VOLBU

Předmětem této studie je rostoucí trend používání genderově neutrálních jmen v současném Japonsku se zaměřením na motivace a důvody, které stojí za jejich volbou. Jejím cílem je na základě kvalitativní obsahové analýzy příběhů o volbě jména, které byly v průběhu patnácti let zveřejňovány na populární japonské webové stránce týkající se rodičovství, prozkoumat, zda je to právě genderově neutrální charakter jména, pro který jej pojmenovatelé primárně volí, nebo zda je volba genderově neutrálního jména spíše náhodná souhra okolností. Výsledky analýzy ukazují, že ačkoli jsou genderově neutrální jména v žebříčcích popularity jmen a v mediálním diskurzu stále častější, jen zřídkakdy jsou vybírána s ohledem na společenské otázky spojené s genderem. Pouze malý počet pojmenovatelů explicitně zmínil genderovou neutralitu, a ještě méně jich uvedlo faktory, jako jsou genderová inkluzivita, flexibilita genderové identity nebo snaha vyhnout se genderovým stereotypům. Zjištění jsou zasazena do kontextu neustále se vyvíjející oblasti pojmenovávání a ukazují, že volba genderově neutrálních jmen v Japonsku často odráží spíše širší změny v pojmenovacích konvencích než vědomou akcentaci genderových otázek. Přesto lze konstatovat, že tato jména přispívají k pozvolnému přenastavení genderových norem v každodenním životě.

Klíčová slova
genderově neutrální jména; motivace; současné Japonsko; volba jména

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