ABSTRACT
Excretory experience is one of the modern-day social taboos. Toilets are designed so that we evacuate behind closed doors, water is used to conceal any foul smell, and we rely on euphemisms whenever we are forced to mention it in any social situation. Consequently, in the Western cultures, defecation has been largely eradicated from the public sphere: we generally do not talk about “it,” as it is not acceptable to remind others, as well as ourselves, of the body’s excretory capacity. If this unspoken agreement is broken, one is in danger of facing social sanctions such as embarrassment. In Japan, however, there is a relatively high social visibility of excrement. By this, I do not mean that material excrement is in abundance on the streets, but that there are many symbolic manifestations of excrement, namely things that remind us of our bodies’ defecatory capacities, such as poop accessories or “poop talk” on TV. Does Japan, country famous for its high-tech toilets, not see poop as taboo? This paper aims to understand the phenomenon of relatively high social visibility of excrement in Japan from a comparative perspective. Based on answers obtained from an online questionnaire with 185 non-Japanese participants who had been to Japan, I categorized various symbolic manifestations of excrement into three realms: health, education, and commodity. I argue the main reason why excretory experience is relatively accepted in Japan is a high health consciousness that sees bowel movement as a health barometer. In turn, Japanese are educated about the body’s excretory capacities, often in a fun way so that it appeals to children. Finally, because health and educational realms sanitized excretory experience, it became just another aspect of everyday life ready to be commodified. This, I conclude, is the ultimate example of relatively high social visibility of excrement in Japan.

KEYWORDS: Japanese toilet culture, defecation, comparative analysis

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Social norms inform us how to behave in any given situation. For example, attending a funeral in flashy clothes would likely be seen as disrespectful.
to those mourning, incestuous behavior is generally not accepted, and taking someone’s life is considered an ultimate violation of accepted norms, thus it usually results in the most severe legal punishment. There are four types of social norms: folkways (often referred to as "customs"); standards of behavior that are socially approved but not morally significant), mores (strict norms that control moral and ethical behavior), taboos (very strong negative norms; prohibitions of certain behavior that are so strict that violating them results in extreme disgust and risks expulsion from the group or society), and laws (norms written down and enforced by an official law enforcement agency) (Anderson and Taylor 2009, Goode 2016). Although these norms vary across time, cultures and place, what they have in common is that dominant norms in a society become so deeply ingrained through the process of socialization, that people feel they must follow them, or they will face social sanctions. One of those sanctions regulating our behavior is the feeling we get when we fail to project an acceptable self in the social situation: embarrassment (Goffman 1967, Gross and Stone 1964, Weinberg 1968). And what is arguably the biggest threat to the most favorable impression of oneself? Excretory experience.

Sigmund Freud in a 1913 foreword to the German translation of John G. Bourke’s *Scatalogic Rites of All Nations* argued that for “civilized men” defecation became a “trace of the Earth embarrassing to bear” (Freud 1958). This statement finds support in Norbert Elias’ seminal *The Civilizing Process* (1939). Elias traced how post-medieval European standards of good manners were gradually transformed by increasing thresholds of shame and repugnance and concluded that at the forefront of most negatively charged bodily practices were sexual and defecatory capacities of the body (Elias 1995). Moreover, David Inglis (2001) pointed out that the standardization of a water closet is “the sine qua non of a society that denies the existence of the human body’s excreta-making capacities” (243): one defecates behind closed doors so that nobody can see the act, water conceals any foul smell, and the sole name – water closet – is a euphemism that has nothing to do with the action taking place inside. As Ervin Goffman (1973) aptly summarized our problem with defecation, it “involves an individual in activity which is defined as inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards expressed in many of our performances” (121). This gap between embarrassing and presentable bodies created our modern excretory stigma: evacuation is something to be conducted only behind closed doors, and any public reminder of this

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1 For more examples on how Western attitudes toward excretory experience changed throughout time see Inglis 2001, Corbin 1986, Vigarello 1988.
particular bodily function goes against accepted notions of good manners, civility and modernity. In Japan, however, symbolic manifestations of excreta, meaning things that remind us of bodies’ defecatory capacities, are relatively present in the public sphere. *Unko Kanji Drill* (うんこ漢字ドリル) (Furuya 2017), a series of kanji learning books that incorporate poop and potty humor into learning, sold 630,000 copies within the first two weeks (Kaneko 2017). *Oshiri Tantei* (おしりたんてい) “The Butt Detective,” is a popular children’s book series about a butt-headed detective that farts in the faces of culprits. It was first published in 2012 as a manga comic (Tanaka, Fukazawa and Tororu 2012), but became so popular that it was turned into anime in 2018, and got a movie release in April 2019 (Tororu 2018). Riding the Tokyo Metro in December 2018, one could see *Oshiri shawa shawa* (お尻シャワシャワ) commercial of portable rear-cleaning device, which features dancing women wearing hats reminiscent of pink butts/peaches that cheerfully sing “I want to make my bottom clean” (*Oshiri o kirei ni shitai no yo.* お尻をきれいにしたいのよ。) In Yokohama, a temporary exhibition (March 15-September 30 2019) *Unko Museum* (うんこミュージアム), literally Poop Museum, managed to draw 10,000 visitors just in the first week of its opening (Akatsuki Live Enterntainment 2019). This highly Instagrammable pop-up museum dedicated to poop proved so popular that its counterpart was opened in Tokyo in August 2019. There are dozens of examples, and the ones above are just some of the more recent instances of what some netizens call “Japanese poop obsession.”\(^2\) Hence, one might ask: how big of taboo is poop in Japan?

In this article I analyze the results of my online questionnaire on what I call, borrowing from Inglis (2001), high social visibility of excreta in Japan. The survey was conducted between July 13, 2016, and December 15, 2016, with a total of 185 non-Japanese participants who had been to Japan.\(^3\) Based on my preliminary findings, I had selected symbolic manifestations of excrement and categorized them into three realms: health, education, and commodity. Each set of questions first presented visual materials (pictures or videos), then asked general questions using the Likert scale, and ended with open-ended questions to obtain further comments. In addition to the questionnaire, I present supporting material from interviews with Japanese nationals. Here, two questions arise: why ask foreigners, and


\(^3\) The questionnaire is available in Szczygiel 2016b.
not Japanese, to examine Japanese attitude towards excretory experience, and what scientific value does material obtained online have?

First, with this article, I aim to highlight the relatively high social visibility of excreta in Japan. As it is relative, a source for reference is needed. Most people brought up in a culture take its norms for granted, and as such do not realize any distinctive characteristics until confronted with a different set of values. The first step of comparative research is the identification of these possible differences, and for this reason, I turn to the testimonies of non-Japanese nationals. Moreover, as mentioned above, when necessary, I will present data from interviews with Japanese nationals to provide a more comprehensive examination of Japanese toilet culture.

Second, data analyzed in this paper comes from an online questionnaire, which was partly anonymous, thus indeed there is a question of how genuine the answers are. Nonetheless, for many, defecation remains a taboo subject, and this anonymity might be the only way for them to openly express their opinions regarding excretory experience. This is the main reason I decided to conduct my questionnaire online. Furthermore, as obtained testimonies are consistent with the ones I frequently hear in private conversations, I contend they are a valid source to use in this study. Finally, I cite these without any edits, thus some of them contain grammatical mistakes or ignore capital letters, which is an unfortunate side effect of online communication.

**Analysis of Questionnaire Results**

First, the essential question is: do non-Japanese think that attitude toward excrement is in any way different from the one in their countries?

As Graph 1 indicates, a definite majority of my respondents, 88%, answered they either agree or strongly agree with the statement. Since the question was asked at the end of the survey in which I presented various symbolic manifestations of excrement in Japan, I asked whether respondents had thought so even before taking the survey. Although the majority stated they had, the negative responses, together with the “not sure” ones, constitute more than a quarter of all answers, which is a significant number (Graph 2). Some bluntly commented that “when I visited I didn't see any of this pop culture that was shown in this survey” (male, 39, Philippines). Therefore, it poses a question as to exactly how representative are presented materials. Nonetheless, 71% of the participants agreeing that they had been aware of some differences before taking the survey is an overwhelming result. I surmise that Japanese ability plays a role in the identification of the manifestations, as most of the
examples require some comprehension of Japanese. For example, when I was living in Osaka, a nearby drug store would play advertising material asking customers if they had confidence in their bowel movement (Jibun no otsūji ni jishin arimasu ka. 自分のお通じに自身ありますか。) Of course, if a customer did not know Japanese, they could not understand the message. I did not include the question regarding Japanese ability in the analyzed survey, which is one of the things to be improved in further research.

Graph 1. “I think the attitude toward excrement in Japan is rather different than the one in my country”

Graph 2. “I thought so even before taking this questionnaire”
Next, I will examine the symbolic manifestations of excrement organized into three provisional realms of health, education, and commodity.

**Health Realm**

Although defecation is one of the basic mechanisms of the human body and an important element of our health, excremental stigma may make it quite difficult to discuss this topic openly. In Japan, however, bowel movement is often called a health barometer and a lot of attention is paid to monitoring one’s stool.

![Graph 3. “Poop is a health barometer”](image)

There is an overall consensus that excrement indicates one’s health: 83% of the respondents agreed that poop is a health barometer (Graph 3). When it comes to monitoring one’s stool, however, people tend to skip this practice.

The next question (Graph 4) leaves to interpretation what is understood by monitoring one’s stool, thus some of my respondents elaborated on the practice:

*For me it is important to go to the toilet every day. If that is not possible I feel bad and know, that I have to change something. But to figure out, what that is, isn't always easy. I don't examine the poop itself, though.* (female, 30, Germany)
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importance as health barometer shouldn't be overstated, but checking for signs of haemorrhaging, parasites etc. is important. (male, 33, Germany)

You can tell how it is by how it feels when you defecate—you don’t need to go poking it around or anything, if it’s too hard—eat more fiber. Checking your poop every day seems silly. (male, 22, USA)

I generally don't notice unless there's something unusual, but I do think it can be a good thing to indicate if you need more or less of something. (male, 35, USA)

Graph 4. “I monitor my health by checking my stool regularly”

Based on the above testimonies, visual inspection of excrement is not a common practice, and more importance is placed on smooth evacuation and noticing anomalies such as bloody stools. Although there is no comparative data analyzing how common visual inspection of feces in Japan is, the idea that one should check their stool seems to be common sense: children are taught that “banana shape” is the healthiest poop and such information is reinforced in the media. More interesting for this study, however, is the fact that healthy bowel movement is often placed in the same category as any other health condition, for example, a headache.

Comparisons of bowel movement irregularities to headaches have frequently appeared in interviews with the Japanese, as well as in private conversations. Putting these two in the same category suggests it is equally acceptable to complain about both. Indeed, I recall a story about one of my
Japanese teachers’ confession that became a sensation in our department. The teacher embodied all good stereotypes about women from Kyoto: she was beautiful, elegant and sophisticated. One day, she looked a little bit under the weather, so a student asked her if she was alright. When she responded, with her usual smile, “oh, I have diarrhea,” the class fell silent. To her it seemed like saying “I have a headache,” but for us, Polish students, it was not socially acceptable to openly mention one’s bowel condition. Such experiences prompted me to ask what participants thought about putting bowel condition in the same category as a headache (Graph 5).

Graph 5. “Bowel conditions fall in the same category as any other health problem such as headaches and I wouldn’t hesitate to tell others about it”

The majority of answers, 45%, were negative, but 36% of participants answered they saw bowel movement in the same category as a headache, while 19% were not sure. Results indicate varied take on the issue and are not conclusive. I surmise further analysis of participants’ backgrounds might shed more light on the issue. As the above-mentioned anecdote suggests, in Poland, for example, bowel conditions and headaches are generally not considered in the same category. Moreover, working part-time as an English teacher in Japan, there were many times when a student would ask me how to say they had diarrhea because they wanted to explain why they were not feeling well. On such occasions, I would explain how to say it in English, but always add it might be seen as “too much information.” Talking with other teachers at work, I realized questions on how to describe problems with bowel movement were quite common,
which used to perplex my coworkers. Although the company employed people from different countries, most of the employees could be described as coming from the so-called Western cultural sphere – Europe, USA or Australia. This indicates that the difference in attitudes towards excretory experience is cultural, with Japanese being more likely to talk about one’s bowel condition than Westerners. Similar suggestion appeared in one of my interviews:

*It was 30 years ago, when I just started to teach Japanese in Kyoto. In a beginner class, when we would teach [vocabulary] “at the hospital” or “body condition,” my senior colleague told me I should not use words like “diarrhea.” … We normally use such words in Japanese. From that time, I hesitate to use such words even with Japanese, and if I have to say it, I use something like “my stomach is not so good.” But now most of the students who learn Japanese at the school are not from the West, but from China, Korea or other Asian countries. Maybe that’s why I feel that more teachers use “diarrhea” normally and no one reprimands them.*

(female, 60s, Kyoto)

Although my respondent found teaching her students how to say they have diarrhea a normal thing, she was cautioned by senior staff not to do it, because in other cultures it might not be accepted. Moreover, she added that when the number of “students from China, Korea, or other Asian countries” increased, she felt that the language could be used again. Hence, it is clear she meant that vocabulary concerning bowel condition might be seen as improper particularly to the Western students. This becomes more clear in further analysis.

So, how acceptable is it to talk about defecation outside Japan? As one can see in Graph 6, more than half of the respondents, 58%, answered it was not socially acceptable. Respondents identified specific situations in which defecation becomes a legitimate topic: at the doctor’s office (but “even then it is highly uncomfortable topic” (female, 27, UK)); among the elderly (often regular evacuation becomes a problem with age); among parents of toddlers, especially mothers (constant contact with their children’s waste); between children (before they master the know-how of a society they live in); and crude males (“when one is drunk and joking with friends” (male, 64, USA)).

Based on these answers, for excretion to become a socially

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4 Needless to say, women also use foul language and are no strangers to vulgar mentions of excrement in conversations. However, as participants clearly stated that “crude males” were the ones to talk about excretory topics, I leave it as it is.
acceptable topic, there has to be either material (e.g. parents of toddler changing diapers), or nonmaterial (e.g. describing one’s bowel movement to a doctor) proximity to excrement. Another possibility for excretory topics to appear in conversations an antithesis to the socially acceptable mention of excreta. This is the case with children talking about poop or vulgar use of excretory language. With children, such situations are usually forgiven, as they still have time to understand social norms. When it comes to vulgar mentions though, people use excretory language precisely because it violates these norms.

Thus, many languages use the equivalent of shit to express negative emotions: think of German Scheiße, French merde, or Japanese kuso (クソ or 粿).

Graph 6. “It is socially acceptable to talk about defecation in my country”

Thus, any mention of defecation in a conversation tends to be regulated by assigning it to one of the accepted categories. In the Japanese context, however, bowel movement can become a topic of a conversation outside of the above categories and still be socially acceptable. Below are comments to follow-up questions regarding public mentions of bowel movement in Japan:

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5 See Bakhtin’s (1984) study of The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel by François Rabelais for his argument on the carnivalesque. This social phenomenon refers to actions that temporarily invert accepted social norms, notably through the use of grotesque realism, where emphasis is placed on the "lower stratum" of the body, such as anus or vagina.
There are so many occasions! I was asked how my bowel movement changed after eating rice regularly, for example. (female, 33, Germany)

I've lived here for 15 years, but when I first came I was surprised at how open people are about poop as compared to the US. (female, USA)

You talk about it to colleagues and teachers. in Russia, you don’t do it that openly - it's private business. (female, 25, Russia)

Openly talking about having problems with bowel movements (and hemorrhoids). (female, 28, Poland)

People are completely ok talking about constipation with their boss at work or even with their mother in law. Maybe this is better but still I find it completely alien. (male, 26, Italy)

The above testimonies express surprise with mentions of excreta outside the categories accepted by the respondents. I argue this is because for my respondents, excretory experience is too taboo to fit in the everyday health category. It is not that some Japanese ask about one’s bowel movement out of some particular interest in excrement, but because in Japanese context defecation is considered one of the important health barometers, thus this topic can appear in everyday conversation regarding health. It is, after all, a perfectly normal biological function, and a vital signifier of human health.

Therefore, rather than asking why is it that in Japan lavatorial matters make for a relatively acceptable topic of conversation, it might be more interesting to pose a corollary question as to why for some people, notably Westerners, any mention of excretion is a social taboo? However, as this paper analyzes Japanese attitude toward excretion, let us briefly explore the origins of the country’s health consciousness.

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6 Comparative analysis of differences of disgust experiences between American and Japanese students found no differences in regard to categories of body products or hygiene, meaning feces are elicitor of disgust both in American and Japanese cultures (Imada, Yamada, and Haidt 1993).

7 Recent studies indicate guts might play even bigger role in the overall health condition than it has been assumed. Gut-brain axis is a communication network that connects gut and brain (Cryan and Dinan 2012, Mayer, Tillisch, and Gupta 2015), and we are just starting to understand how the gut microbiome affects mental health (Kelly et al. 2015, Yang et al. 2019, Valles-Colomer et al. 2019) or neurodegenerative diseases (Kowalski and Mulak 2019, Felice et al. 2016). Moreover, there is a great potential in fecal material transplantation (Filip, Tzaneva, and Dumitrascu 2018).

8 For discussion on origins of Christian condemnation of excrement see Bayless 2013.
Health and hygiene were extremely important factors in Japanese nation building from the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), the concept of hygiene (eisei 衛生) reached Japan with the government believing that it was the key to equality with the West, and promoting health became the people’s responsibility. The government’s stance was aptly summarized in a 1900 “hygiene anthem” (eisei shōka 衛生唱歌), according to which “the people’s body and mind had to be healthy to observe loyalty to the Emperor and filial piety to ancestors” (Lee 2008: 8). Intellectuals were also involved in the discourse. For example, Natsume Sōseki, one of the greatest writers in modern Japanese history, criticized the strong national interference in people’s everyday lives:

_But what a horror if we had to... eat for the nation, wash our faces for the nation, go to the toilet for the nation!_ (cited in Bellah 2003: 43)

Hygiene also became crucial for the Japanese military. Probably the most influential advocate of the state’s military power and the health of its populace was Gōtō Shinpei. In 1889 he classified national hygiene into two types: ordinary hygiene, referring to civil life, and emergency hygiene, which belonged to war. His concept of the hygienic body was clearly influenced by Herbert Spencer’s theory of a “social organism,” that saw the nation along with its social structure as an organic body (Frühstück 2003). These were the beginnings of the _kokutai_ (国体) ideology, literally “national body,” which considered the Japanese nation as one superior entity with the emperor at its head. However, the new hygienic ordinance did not ignore the lower part of the body.

Japan had a long history of dependence on night soil, which is a euphemism for human excreta used as fertilizer. Consequently, excrement had been an integral part of Japanese everyday life, and by the end of the Edo period (1603-1868), it was considered valuable to the point that incidents of theft appear in records (Hanley 1987). However, besides the economic value of excrement, the Japanese were aware of the importance the bowel movement had on the overall health condition. For example, from the second part of the nineteenth century, ukiyo-e prints representing medical understanding of the body begin to appear. Among them is the “Mirror of the physiology of drinking and eating” (_Inshoku yōjō kagami_ 飲
食養生鑑） by Utagawa Kunisada, dated back to the mid-nineteenth century (Figure 1). It depicts a male sitting in front of a meal and drinking alcohol with his organs and different stages of the digestive process visible. The print was meant to caution that overindulging in food and drink could lead to illness.

Moreover, in 1928 hemorrhoids were classified as a “national disease” by the Asahi newspaper and, around the same time, reports of politicians, including Prime Minister Katō Tomosaburō, suffering from them hit the news (Bay 2012). The army even imposed strict regulations for rectal inspection. Alexander R. Bay estimates that “in 1925… over 55,000 army workdays were lost to haemorrhoid treatment” (ibid.: 155), with some blaming Japanese-style toilets for the disease. Dr. Hirano Kōdō, for
example, declared that “squatting over the latrine and exerting all one’s strength blocked circulation and caused blood congestion around the anus” (ibid.: 148).

Therefore, the new health regime was interested in every part of the body, bowels included. It was because the government, with Gotō as the representative, deemed hygiene as the basis of colonial power, arguing that “the degree of civilization attained by a people [might] be measured by the success of its sanitary administration” (Takekoshi 1907: 283). Describing the new hygienic modernity in Meiji Japan, Ruth Rogaski (2004) even concludes that “Japanese elites successfully avoided Western colonization in part by acquiring the ability to colonialize themselves” (163). Consequently, the hygienic governance gave root to the idea that “the Meiji society was clean [not] because of its morality, but that it was moral because of cleanliness” (Lee 2008: 22).

I do not suggest that Meiji standards regarding health are a common belief until this day, but I argue that the importance of “staying healthy” is that ideology’s legacy. Hence, the Japanese pay much attention to their health in general, and bowel movement is one of its indicators – a health barometer. This is one of the reasons defecation became sanitized and is now a relatively acceptable topic of conversation in everyday life.

**Education Realm**

The second category of manifestations of excrement in Japan is the education realm. Here I categorized all phenomena that are connected with toilet training and educating children about the importance of defecation. Asked whether it was important to teach children about poop, most of my respondents answered positively: 57% either agree or strongly agree with the statement (Graph 7). It is surprising, then, that a definite majority, 72%, stated it was not common in their countries to educate children about bowel movement (Graph 8). Therefore, although the importance of “poop education” is acknowledged, it generally ends with basic toilet training – once a child learns to use the potty alone, it is over. In Japan, however, more significance is put on understanding what waste tells one about their health condition, thus children are taught about consistency etc. of excrement. I will elaborate on this further in this section.

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10 Another important, yet falling beyond the scope of this paper, reason is traditional attitude toward defecation based on Japanese cosmology. For a preliminary discussion see SzczygIEL 2017, while this topic will be further analyzed in my forthcoming paper on cultural origins of waste management to be published in Worldwide Waste Journal in 2020.
Furthermore, participants who have experienced parenthood in Japan pointed out the following:

*Books and anime, children's TV, toilet training treated in a straightforward and pragmatic manner. Like teeth brushing or putting on clothing.* (male, 50, Australia)

*I remember my family in Australia being shocked at how publicly my (Japanese) wife used to toilet train our children.* She
would give them lots of verbal encouragement as she held them over the public toilet. (male, 48, Australia)

The second comment mentions surprise at how openly the respondent’s wife toilet trained their children. His Australian family’s reaction implies some level of discomfort regarding excretory experience, even if it is about teaching children how to use a toilet. Most probably what the family found especially “shocking” was verbal encouragement to defecate in public, as “these things” should not be discussed outside. The following testimony supports this assumption:

Talking about stool is generally not a comfortable subject and children being children can bring up these at inappropriate situations so perhaps it's better to educate the children when they are old enough to understand the situation around them while just lightly touch on the topic with the younger children for the more important symptoms. (female, 35, Iran)

For this respondent, talking about stool is “uncomfortable,” so she suggests not to mention the topic until the child is older – otherwise they might bring it up at “inappropriate situations,” by which she probably means in public. It means that talking about excreta, even by children, is not exactly acceptable, or at least not a preferred behavior. As another participant states:

Kids seem especially obsessed with poop in Japan... While I think it's important to be informed about things like this, kids here seem obsessed with it in some regards. A 4-year-old's proclamation of "unchi!" is a surefire way to derail the classroom into a fit of giggles. ... Even by the time they're 7 or 8 they still often draw "poop piles" on their notebooks or homework. (male, 35, USA)

Children often become fascinated with excreta. Freud theorized this is a manifestation of the “anal stage,” second stage of psychosexual development, which lasts from 18 months to 3 years of age (Freud 1991). Here, however, we are talking about older children mentioning poop. What my informant finds especially indicative of an “obsession” is when 7 or 8-year-old children “still often draw ‘poop piles’ on their notebooks or homework.” Such comments clearly show that, according to his cultural programing, poop is not an acceptable topic even among children. Again,
the fact that elementary school children (and arguably even older ones) can say *unchi* (うんち) for poop or draw “poop piles” on their notebooks, indicates bowel movement is not negatively charged in Japan. To reiterate, Japanese children are not particularly obsessed with feces, they just live in a society that is more accepting of mentions of bowel movement in public, because it is considered a health barometer. Although it is unlikely 7 or 8-year-old children mention poop in the health context, they are educated from an early age to pay attention to their bowel movement. Surrounded by educational materials that present the topic in an attractive way for children, such as picture books or games, they see it as something normal. I surmise if a child reads a picture book with different animals and no one scolds them for saying “lion,” they would assume it is exactly acceptable to say “poop” after reading a related book. The connection between bowel movement and health condition is rooted, among others, in materials on poop education, however, it becomes apparent to the child only when they grow older.

The topic of books on poop education came up with one of my younger interviewees, a 25-year-old female from Osaka. She emphasized that bowel movement helped her control her health condition. Upon asking where she learned about this connection, she mentioned one particular book that influenced her view:

*In a book that I read as a child, it was written that we can judge our health by the color or shape and I believe in it. Also, you can see that in your everyday life: before period I tend to get constipated, but when it starts I get diarrhea. There are such changes, that’s why.* (female, 25, Toyama)

The name of the book was *Unpi, Un’nyo, Unchi, Ungo – Unko no Ehon* (うんぴ・うんにょ・うんち・うんご―うんこのえほん, the names are supposed to express different kinds of stools). In the book, Professor Stool (*Daiben hakase* 大便はかせ) explains what kind of poop one makes when they eat a particular food. For example, if you eat too cold things, your poop will be yellowish and smell like a rotten egg, but if you eat a lot
of vegetables and exercise daily, you will make a spiral pile or a banana of “pretty brown” which does not smell too bad.\footnote{Although there is no doubt that diet impacts stool shape or color, I cannot confirm scientific value of such statements. Similarly, another folk wisdom I often encountered during my interviews is that it is good to wear extra clothing around one’s belly, because when it gets cold, one might get diarrhea. Finally, assumptions that Japanese’s intestines are longer than the Westerners’, and that is why they suffer from constipations, is also a widely repeated “common sense,” which was proven false (Nagata et al. 2013).}

The book is quite visual and informative – it gives children a basic knowledge of defecation in a fun way. Such visual materials, however, are relatively new on the market. None of my older interviewees was familiar with similar educational materials, and most of them did not deem such materials particularly important:

*When I was a child, there were no such materials. This was something you would learn from your parent. ... Stool reflects your health condition, so it is important to know such things, but ... We would simply learn it from parents.* (male, 66, Osaka)

The first book about poop in Japan, to my knowledge, was Gomi Tarō’s *Everyone Poops* (*Minna unchi みんなうんち*), published in 1977. It was released in the US in 1993 and is still one of the most recommended books for children on toilet issues. I contacted the author to inquire about what motivated him to draw a book with illustrations of defecating animals.

*Everyone Poops, like my other works, is a completely original creation. I thought about drawing this picture book when I saw steaming poops of various animals on one early morning in winter at a zoo. Somehow. That’s all there is to the story. From then, all reactions or appraisals have no direct connection with me, but thankfully [the book] seems to be quite loved. (…) In the end, even if it became used in what you call “toilet training,” is analyzed as a book on excretory problems, or oriental perspective on nature (indeed, there has been research like that in America), the author only stays quiet and smiles.*

Gomi Tarō states his only motivation was amusement at “steaming poops” at a zoo in winter and seems quite amused that his book came to be used in toilet training, or that somebody would be interested in it from an academic point of view. However, I argue nobody would even think about drawing a picture book of pooping animals if they thought defecation was taboo.
Moreover, the fact that the book was published, and even became a bestseller, implies the topic was relatively accepted in the society at the time.

Figure 2. Fragment of *Unpi, Un’nyo, Unchi, Ungo – Unko no Ehon* by Murakami Yachiyo and Sebe Masayuki (2007)

Nowadays, books on poop-related subjects are gaining more popularity also outside Japan. Some of them, however, are faced with a strong backlash. Ann Curry (2012) in her examination of reactions to books with scatological content in children books notes that back in the late 1980s, Canada’s king of children’s books, Robert Munsch, had trouble selling tale of a little girl whose parents think that people in good families, like theirs, do not fart. Eventually, he was approached by a publisher who agreed to publish the book on condition they would leave the word “fart” out of the cover title, thus the book was titled simply *Good Families Don’t* (1990) (Boesveld 2012). Other examples include *Walter the Farting Dog* (Kotzwinkle and Murray 2011), which in 2004 made a former school board trustee in Wisconsin so upset over the word “fart” in the story about an old, fat dog with incurable flatulence, that he wanted the book banned from the state’s school system (the book was also challenged in a number of libraries in America when it first came out in 2001), or *Captain Underpants* (Pilkey 1997) book series receiving the most complaints from libraries due to offensive content in the United States in 2012 and 2013 (it made a comeback at third place in 2018) (American Library Association 2018). Analyzing interviews with 16 children’s librarians from across Canada, Curry argues one of the main reasons why librarians defended books with scatological content is they realize children go through a
difficult stage right after potty training. “[I]t’s been the entire focus of the child’s life and focus of much of the interaction between parent and child. But as soon as the child is potty trained, then all of a sudden you’re not supposed to talk about it. A child yelling in the library, ‘Mommy, mom I need to poo poo’ is met with a shhhh…. That’s why kids are enjoying this. They’re trying to figure out what is taboo and what isn’t,” she concludes (Boesveld 2012).

Here I would like to point out one difference between Western and Japanese children's books on poop-related topics: Western ones use excretory topics mainly to show children that defecation or flatulence is nothing to be ashamed of or to draw some laughs. Japanese books, on the other hand, accomplish the same, but the focus is more on the health aspect of bowel movement – consider Professor Stool who urges children to eat a lot of vegetables and exercise daily, so they will make a spiral pile or a banana-shaped poop. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of toilet educational events.

Events like *Toire? Ittoire* (トイレ？行っトイレ) (Tokyo, National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation, 7/2-10/5/2014; Osaka, Grand Front Osaka, 8/15-8/30/2015), or *Karada no fushigi daibōken* (からだのふしぎ大冒険) (Saitama, Saitama Super Arena, 7/27-8/22/2015) are not common in Japan, but once held, they receive great media attention and become instant hits. During such events children can wear a poop-shaped hat and slide down the toilet into the sewer, make their own poop from clay, see, touch and smell different types of excrement, or enter through a gigantic anus to see what is inside their bowels. For children it is mainly about having fun, but the educational aspect is very much present – some of the panels included “how the urge to defecate is triggered?” or “the softness of feces.” It is safe to assume that children who participated in these events would be more conscious of their bowel movement and see how it is connected to one’s health.

Inquiry into what my participants thought about educational events on excretory issues shows that even though they have not heard of similar events in their countries, they are generally open to the idea – 53% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that poop is not something to be talked about, thus such events are unnecessary (Graph 10). As one informant stated: “I cannot recall there being dedicated ’events' about toilet usage or poop, but it is not a taboo in general” (male, 26, Denmark).

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12 The most recent example is *Unko Museum* that was mentioned in the introduction. However, this event falls into the commodity realm, thus it will not be analyzed here.
Figure 3. Picture taken at the *Toire? Ittoire* event in Tokyo (Author’s collection)

Graph 9. “There are educational events about toilets or defecation in my country”
Graph 10. “Poop is not something to be talked about and I think such events are not necessary”

It is worth noticing, however, that in the same question a significant number of participants, 30%, answered they were not sure whether excreta should be discussed in public or not. Even among positive answers, some admitted finding poop-related events “a bit shocking,” but such “natural things are not to be ashamed of” (female, 25, Russia). The following comment summarized this attitude:

Where I am from (the western hemisphere) poop is to embarrassing to talk about openly. I am generalizing of course but there seems to be a distaste to talking about it openly. Seeing as it is a normal bodily function that everyone has to perform, I think it is healthy to talk and educate especially children about poop and pooping. Probably adults as well. (male, 27, Sweden)

Therefore, I surmise the reason for the high percentage of “not sure” answers lies in an internal contradiction: the first reaction to seeing pictures of children playing with poop is not positive. It comes from the cultural background, where any mention of defecation is stigmatized. However, rationally thinking, it helps children understand the connection between the shape of feces and their health condition, thus it is not negative per se. One informant answered that “educational events are good, however making it ridiculous by wearing poop hats is not what it is meant to be” (male, 30, Germany), and this might be why some felt puzzled when evaluating such events in Japan. The more we see something as taboo, the
stricter regulations regarding it are: one should learn about defecation, but it should not be fun.
As for respondents who answered similar events should not be held, they were much more opinionated:

This would definitely not even get through the approval stage of a project screening in Canada. (female, 22, Canada)

I have had little to no poop education. Honestly I think it's disgusting and I try not to think about it. (male, 28, USA)

It's fucking childish how they do it here (Japan). Leave that stupid stuff in schools. (male, 38, England)

I was a junior high school science teacher in the USA, and these "events" are NOT educational except at the pre-school level---- Waste of time and educational resources. (male, 64, USA)

Strong language such as “disgusting,” “waste of time,” or cursing imply highly negative emotions associated with mentioning excretion in public. Interestingly, in this case, also the most negative answers come from respondents from the Western cultural background: United States, Canada, England. However, as participants were not required to answer open-ended questions, I can rely on very limited data – only 29 participants answered follow-up questions regarding toilet education events. Thus, it is not sufficient to draw a definite conclusion.
Above I have argued that what characterizes Japanese poop-related events is the focus on the educational aspect. However, as some participants pointed out, there are also events which serve a different purpose:

I saw a TV show where a comedian visited an elementary school dressed in a poop superhero costume and taught them not to be embarrassed about using the toilet. I think this would be less likely to happen in other countries. (male, 39, UK)

Visit to a school to teach children that using the toilet is nothing to be embarrassed by is definitely an example of high social visibility of excreta (especially when it includes a TV host dressed as a poop superhero), yet it is not of the same nature as other events discussed in this section. Its purpose is not to teach children about the health aspect of bowel movement, but to destigmatize the practice of defecation.
Recently, constipation in children has become a problem in Japan, and the squat toilets in schools are thought to be the reason. The Japanese-style toilets (washiki 和式), are rarely seen in private houses, thus children do not know how to use them. Yet, according to a survey on toilets in public elementary and middle schools conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 56.7% of lavatories are the washiki type (MEXT 2016). Thus, even if a child has to use the toilet at school, they tend to hold up because they are not familiar with the Japanese-style toilets, and only use the bathroom when they get back home. Consequently, parents demand schools to renovate school lavatories described as 3K: dirty (kitanai 汚い), dark (kurai 暗い), scary (kowai 怖い), so there would only be the Western-style ones (J-Cast News 2016).\(^\text{13}\) This is the official version, which I was also told in an interview with Katō Atsushi, the representative of Japan Toilet Labo (official English version of Nihon toire kenkyūjo 日本トイレ研究所), an NPO organization aiming, amongst other things, to improve the toilet environment at schools so children can use them whenever they need. To destigmatize the process of defecation, the organization holds “Toilet lessons” (Toire kyōshitsu トイレ教室), where a poop prince visits schools to talk with children. Indeed, some children might find it hard to use a squat toilet at first, as do many foreigners when they encounter it for the first time. A survey conducted by Japan Toilet Labo with elementary school children found that 12% of participants could not use the squat toilet at all, while 38% answered they could, but did not like it (Katō 2015).\(^\text{14}\) Moreover, 46% stated they refrained from using a school privy, while 35% responded the reason for doing so was their dislike of the Japanese-style toilet. It definitely is a big problem; however, I would like to highlight that 54% of children who said they tried to not use the toilet at school, answered it was because they were embarrassed. This suggests the issue is not as much in the type of toilet, but rather in the fact that children are embarrassed to use it in general. Although the survey provides no data about respondents’ sex, based on my interviews with Japanese nationals, I surmise most of those embarrassed to use the toilet at school could be boys.

\(^{13}\) Old school lavatories indeed have a bad reputation. For example, they are the setting of a popular Japanese urban legend about Hanako san. It is a story about the spirit of a young girl who haunts school bathrooms and drags people into the toilet to kill them.

\(^{14}\) Unfortunately, the survey does not state the participant pool, thus it is impossible to judge the scale of this problem. However, Japan Toilet Labo repeated the survey in March 2017, obtaining very similar results. The second survey interviewed 4777 elementary school students (Katō 2018).
Defecating at school in Japan, especially when one has to use the men’s restroom, can be problematic. The design of the men’s facilities divides urinals and cabins, thus usually when a man enters a bathroom stall, it is equal with them going to defecate. At schools, if boys are seen by others entering the cabin, they are called the poop boy (unchi kun うんちくん) and publicly made fun of. Some of my informants admitted that in fear of being ridiculed, they would not defecate at school:

In elementary school, boys pee, but are embarrassed to poo. They don’t want to get inside [a toilet cabin]. That’s why they do it at home. Middle school was the same. Everyone’s embarrassed they might be seen by someone from their class when they get out [of the stall]. “You pooped!,” they would say. (male, 66, Osaka)

Oh, yes, in my times [children] would make fun of you if you pooped at school. Even if you tried to hide it, they would start saying “he pooped, he pooped.” Personally, I didn’t care too much about it… well, my stomach condition was like that, so I often had to go to the toilet. (male, 56, Kyoto)

Peeing was still OK, but pooping at school was very embarrassing. In the boy’s toilet, there are both urinals and normal toilets, so when one goes to the normal toilet, everybody knows [that he’s going to defecate]. Then you become a laughing stock. Also, it smells. So in elementary school, you either hold it in or do it at home. I learned to hold it in. … At school, your status depends on how long you control yourself. There are school trips. Then, I would hold it in for three days. (male, 45, Osaka)

Above testimonies come from male informants, but this “inability” of men to defecate in public places seems to be common sense in Japan, which became apparent in another interview with a mother of two:

I heard that, well, men go to work in the morning, right? At work, they have to go to the bathroom, but peeing takes only a minute, while poop, well, there aren’t many men who can do it quickly. That’s why boys are always told to leave home after doing it. It’s their habit from their young days. … I would tell my son that. He [probably] hesitated to go inside when he was at school. So I would always ask “did you poop?” … I think that every boy
poops before he leaves home. Their moms must ask that. (female, 77, Nagoya)

The respondent, based on the “common knowledge” assumed her son would hesitate to defecate at school, so she would urge him to go to the bathroom before he left home. As my interviewee also had a daughter, I asked if she used to ask her the same questions, to which she replied: “now that I think about it, no, I didn’t. Well, girls can go whenever they want to, can’t they?” Moreover, she insisted it was common sense and other mothers surely continue this practice even now (informant was talking about the situation in the 1960s-70s).

Arguably, the design of men’s restrooms with shared urinals and private cabins has become ubiquitous. Therefore, a similar phenomenon could possibly exist in other countries as well, but as there is no data on it, we cannot be sure. What this issue in Japanese context brings to attention though, is the following paradox: on one hand, there is relatively little stigma regarding asking people about their bowel movement, while on the other, actually using the toilet to defecate is considered a social taboo. I argue it is because of a dichotomy between the notion and practice of defecation. Usually, if a culture sees excrement in a negative way, then the practice will be equally negatively charged, ergo will become a social taboo. In Japan, however, the notion of defecation, meaning the concept of excrement and bowel movement, is not particularly stigmatized – this is why it is relatively acceptable to talk about bowel movement. When it comes to the practice, however, progressive adaptation of Western sanitary technology and mores from the Meiji period on, made it a source of embarrassment on par with the Western prototype. The dichotomy between notion and practice of defecation goes beyond the scope of this paper, thus here I only signal the issue and direct the reader to my future publications.

Commodity Realm

The last category identified in this study is the commodity realm. Here I examine symbolic manifestations of excrement that serve no strictly health-oriented, nor educational purposes, but commodify excrement in popular culture.

First, I presented my participants with some poop accessories available in Japan. Among them were telephone straps, bath salts or toys, all looking like a Japanese-style poop. The majority, 65%, stated there were no similar accessories in their countries (Graph 11).

15 Analyzed questionnaire was conducted in 2016, and it is possible that now answers especially to
Graph 11. “I think there are similar goods in my country”

Interestingly, some of the opinions on poop accessories were quite negative: “[p]eople just don't think poop is gross, which is weird to me because I definitely do” (male, 28, USA). Words like “gross” or disgusting” often appeared in the comments, showing a highly negative attitude towards this particular form of manifestation of excrement. On the other hand, many respondents pointed out that Japanese poops are not exactly realistic:

*Weird. So many people I know think they're "soft cream" and not poop piles. It's gross. [I find strange all of the poop merchandise, and the fact that trendy, cute girls sometimes wear it... But honestly, I don't feel like it is particularly connected to poop when they do. It's moved into the "cute"/funny category. It's very strange.* (male, 35, USA)

*Depends on the product. I think kawaii poop things are cool - but more realistic ones are more dubious.* (male, 50, Australia)

*If it does not look like actual poop, but like a comic version I can't see any problem with it, even if it is presented as a dessert or something to eat in general.* (female, 31 Korea)

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this question would be different. In 2017 *Emoji Movie* was released, and although it got rather negative reviews, poop toys shaped after one of the characters, the poop emoji, flooded international markets.
To me the poop goods on display here don't look much like poop to me. Of course there is the cultural understanding that they represent poop, but (perhaps luckily) they don't resemble the real thing that much. If they did, I would have a harder time swallowing them. (male, 27, Sweden)

Indeed, Japanese take on poop does not look like actual feces. It is in the shape of a spiral pile, reminiscent of a soft serve ice cream. It is unknown when depicting feces in such way actually started, but we can see similarly shaped excrement in *Gaki-zōshi* (餓鬼草子), a Buddhist painting from the second half of the twelfth century, while in a toilet-themed 2006 calendar released by a probiotic drinks company, it is claimed that spiral poop dates back to the Edo period (1603-1868), where it was used to parody a snake (Yakult 2006).

In popular culture, probably the first depiction of spiral pile poop appeared in *Toiretto Hakase*, “The Toilet Professor,” a comedy manga by Torii Kazuyoshi (1978) that ran in Weekly Shōnen Jump from 1970 to 1977. However, at that time it was not exactly cute – “kawaii” poop became the norm thanks to Arale chan, but I will discuss this later. Eventually, the image has become ingrained in Japanese culture, and more poop accessories would be released. For example, a golden poop lucky charm was created in 1999, and it became a hit in 2000 when high-school girls began buying them as “silly souvenirs” – in Japanese *unko* (うんこ) starts from the morpheme *un* (運 as in luck), thus because of this wordplay golden poop became a lucky charm (Gordenker 2007).

In the same year poop charms were released, Japan’s three major telecom carriers – KDDI AU, SoftBank, and NTT-DoCoMo – created first emoji, ideograms and smileys used in electronic messages, and, poop was among them. In 2007 Google partnered with KDDI AU and decided to adopt emoji for Gmail, and from then spiral poop symbol has become the default image for feces (Schwartzberg 2014).

Another example of the commodification of excrement is its use in popular culture. I showed my participants scatological pictures from manga and

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16 Interestingly, feces presented in this “Japanese way” can be found in a painting of Bernard Picart (1673-1733) titled *Le Perfumeur*.

17 It was not an easy endeavor though – although the Japanese side wanted to have the poop sign in the first cut of Gmail emoji, American headquarters found an animated turd offensive. This episode supports the argument made in this paper that relatively high social visibility of excrement in Japan becomes especially apparent when compared with Western countries. For more information on how poop emoji made its way to America see *The Oral History Of The Poop Emoji* (Schwartzberg 2014).
anime, as well as presented two videos: opening of *Unko san* (うんこさん) (Iya 2009), an anime series about a poop family, and a fragment of *Mottainairando* (もったいないとらんど, Mottai Nightland), a music video of a popular singer Kyary Pamyu Pamyu (2013), in which she defecates a pink poop. As one can see in Graph 12, the majority of respondents, 62%, answered excrement was not used in pop culture in their countries.

Graph 12. “Poop appears in pop culture in my country”

When excrement is used in pop culture, though, it is usually vulgarized. Many compared presented material with *South Park* (Parker and Stone 1997), an adult animated TV series, and pointed to the difference in how excreta are depicted in the series and in Japan. *South Park* is famous for its crude language and dark humor. For example, in the ninth episode of the first season, Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poop appears to comfort Kyle, a Jewish boy, who feels excluded when the rest of the town celebrates Christmas. In the end, Mr. Hankey saves the day, but leaves poop stains as he does. Such vulgar/funny usage is in contrast with how poop tends to be depicted in Japanese media. For example, if we compare it with the *Unko san* cartoon we see that, although it is also on the humorous side, characters look and act very differently. Mr. Hankey looks relatively realistic, while Unko san, although there is no doubt he is a living turd, looks somehow softer; Mr. Hankey leaves brown stains wherever he goes, while Unko san floats having a good time with his friends and family. In follow-up questions on excrement in popular culture my respondents point
out again that the Japanese version of poop looks nothing like the real thing:

On the one hand, everyone poops. So it's a common theme that people can identify with. But on the other hand, it's rarely depicted in a realistic way... The poops shown are usually pink or gold and in spiral piles unlike how a human would actually defecate. I've never seen the Unko-san series before, but even that isn't really depicted like an actual poop. (male, 35, USA)

Since poop is more "taboo" in my country, it's mostly used to shock, or for humorous purposes. I suppose the use here is also a bit on the humorous side, but the more it is used the more desensitized people become to it and it loses some of the "edge" if that makes sense. (male, 27, Sweden)

The trend appears to link the desire to "cute-ize" everything to make it more marketable, although to what end beyond that is unclear. (female, 40, USA)

When poop is used in western pop culture it is often used to evoke disgust. I haven't seen any depictions of poop as cute outside Japan. (male, 39, UK)

This cute makeover seems to be the key to why scatological images are accepted in the country. However, even in Japan, excreta used to be depicted in a more realistic way. Probably the first time poop was used in Japanese pop culture was the already mentioned Toiretto Hakase by Torii Kazuyoshi (1978 [1971]). It was about the adventures of the Toilet Professor, who, together with his team, researched excreta. Feces in the comic were in the spiral pile form, but there was nothing cute about them – they were dark, coming out of anuses, and stank. Similar, of even slightly more grotesque, is the excretory image found in another manga, Makoto chan (まことちゃん) by Umezu Kazuo (1999). The series ran in Shōnen Sunday from 1976 to 1981 and later returned as Heisei-ban Makoto chan (平成版まことちゃん) from 1988 to 1989. The plot is about the life of a kindergartener Makoto Sawada and his family, who often gets into toilet humor.
In contrast with these realistic turds is the pink poop from Toriyama Akira’s *Dr. Slump* (*Dr.スランプ*) (1980) that ran in Weekly *Shōnen Jump* from 1980 to 1984. *Dr. Slump* is about endeavors of a girl robot Arale chan, who would often play with a cute poop that could talk with her. Japanese usually point to Arale chan as the prototype of “kawaii” poop, thus it is plausible to assume the image was established thanks to this manga. But why exactly has poop become so cute in Japan? I suggest it is a result of the progressive adaptation of Western excretory mores.

When excrement started to appear in manga in the 1970s, it still had some attributes of real feces – it was drawn as dark and smelly. Then it changed into a pink poop in 1980 with *Dr. Slump*. This decade is a crucial time for the development of sanitation in Japan: diffusion of the sewer pipes progressed only following revision of the Sewage Law in 1970, which in turn led to the increase of households installing western style privies – their sales suppressed sales of Japanese-style toilets for the first time in 1977 (Hayashi 2011). Following Inglis’ (2001) theory, the development of toilet technology and popularization of private toilets removes excrement from the public sphere. Therefore, in order for depictions of excrement to remain in public, these had to be changed into something deemed acceptable, thus a cute poop was created.

The last example of excreta in the commodity realm is “poop talk” in the media. *Chōkatsu* (腸活) is a term used to describe efforts to keep one’s bowel movement regular. Many TV programs broadcast segments on chōkatsu with diet suggestions and commentaries from physicians, examples of exercise stimulating bowel movement, but also footage from colonoscopy or detailed descriptions of one’s stool. Usually, participants of talk shows are celebrities, and it is the same in the case of “poop talk,” but sometimes even high-profile personalities, such as Wada Akiko, a popular Japanese singer, appear to talk about their bowel movement.

In response to whether “poop talk” was a suitable topic for TV, 47% of the participants answered positively (Graph 13). Thus, it appears that talking about defecation on television is not especially negatively charged. Nonetheless, in the next question, 71% answered discussions on poop did not appear in the media in their countries (Graph 14).

Analyzing additional comments regarding toilet content in the media, rather large amount of discomfort is clearly present:

*Sometimes you can find the topic of poop in so many programs, that it gets hard to avoid. If it comes up too often that is also a little uncomfortable. I don't feel like hearing about other peoples*
digestion early in the morning while having my breakfast. (female, 31 Korea)

*I* think it’s pretty gross. I understand poop and awareness is important but still I don’t want to see it when I’m eating or talking with my coworkers. (male, 26, Italy)

On cable TV, they have these endless commercials for various laxative products, teas and what not, I find them quite annoying. The woman coming out of the toilet and happily declaring 'dekita!' while I’m eating really bugs me. (male, 45, USA)

What especially triggers discomfort is seeing scatological content while eating. People tend to dissociate eating and defecating, starting and end functions of the digestive system, while what we eat strictly influences our evacuation. One respondent pointed out Japanese low in fiber diet might be the reason for such a high demand for such programs:

Considering how constipated I get after staying at my inlaws’ home eating their minimal-vegetables minimal-fiber white-rice washoku diet [Japanese-style diet], I am /not surprised by this in the least/. I think the reason we don’t talk about poop in American media is because fiber supplementation and laxatives are heavily advertised instead. (female, 26, USA)

Graph 13. “‘Poop talk’ is a suitable topic for TV”
Graph 14. “Discussions on poop appear on TV or in other media in my country”

The suggestion that “poop talk” is popular in Japanese media because there is no or little advertisement of laxatives is not true – on the contrary, medications regulating bowel movement are heavily advertised and have separate sections at drug stores. However, the idea that Japanese diet might lead to constipation is sound and explains why there are so many programs on the topic. Nevertheless, what is of more importance for this study is the way topics such as constipation are handled. For example, in one program three women suffering from severe constipation talk about their problems. One had not had a bowel movement for one month and was taken by an ambulance, another admits she has to scrape out feces with her finger, while the last one drinks laxatives at the weekend and evacuates one-week worth of excreta (footage from this program was presented to the respondents). Celebrities in the studio listen to these confessions and open up about their own problems so that at the end all can practice how to stimulate bowel movement, which must be working, as one participant starts yelling “it’s about to get out!” (dechau 出ちゃう).

Therefore, although programs on chōkatsu deal with problems of bowel movement irregularities, they do it to produce entertaining content, rather than provide medical advice. This quality makes Japanese “poop talk” programs stand out from the ones my respondents were used to:

*I feel it's only acceptable in a medical context. Popularising poop any other way seems childish and immature.* (male, 39, Australia)
In my country, it might appear on a medical show, or possibly in stand up comedy. Nothing like the aforementioned examples. But I can’t help but feel like the examples above are taking it a bit too far and are sensationalizing it or using poop because of public interest. I mean, normalizing it and talking about health issues is good, but milking it for entertainment is, at least to me, not an interesting topic (though I am not explicitly against it per se). (male, 27, Sweden)

In UK it’s either comedy or more serious medical programming with real science, not pop science with celebrities trying to entertain and inform at the same time. (male, 49, UK)

The only place that I think this sort of thing would be acceptable are on medical style shows, and definitely not in the fun, silly way these are depicted. It would likely be serious and discussed as so by a doctor. They’d probably also use a lot of euphemisms to avoid saying poop/fecal matter, such as "blockage" or "mass". (male, 35, USA)

Figure 4. Examples of “poop talk” from Japanese TV.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Snapshots from the following programs: 1) Yoyaku sattō! Sugowaza no senmongairai SP (予約
Informants deem the way defecation is presented on Japanese TV as “childish,” “silly” or “immature.”\textsuperscript{19} For them, the only acceptable way to talk about defecation on television is from a medical perspective. Moreover, it is embarrassing to appear on such shows as “anyone apart from a doctor who would dare to talk about their stool on TV would be forever: ‘the person who talked about poop on TV’” (female, 30, Germany). Such comments indicate that for the respondents, excrement is acceptable only in the health realm, and even then its mentions are regulated by euphemisms. In Japan, on the other hand, poop is used to make entertaining content for viewers – it is commodified.

As I have argued in this paper, in Japan the correlation between excrement and health is deeply ingrained. This is the reason why people relatively freely discuss bowel movement, and why there are so many educational materials regarding defecation. Consequently, the notion of defecation has become sanitized by the health paradigm, and as such is present in everyday imagination. Without particularly negative charging, excrement became a material ready to be commodified as poop charms, manga characters, or “poop talk” on television. These examples in the commodity realm show how various actors capitalize on scatological imaginary, thus are the farthest from the original health aspect that made poop relatively socially accepted in Japan in the first place. Nevertheless, the fact that the image of feces is present outside of the health realm, and could even be commodified, is the ultimate evidence that, from a comparative perspective, the notion of excrement is not particularly stigmatized in Japan.

**Conclusion**

This paper examined relatively high social visibility of excrement in Japan and categorized symbolic manifestations of excrement into three realms of health, education, and commodity. I contend that health consciousness is the main reason behind this phenomenon – the correlation between regular bowel movement and health condition is common sense and has become one of the health barometers. Thus, the health aspect of excrement sanitizes it, to some degree, of possible negative charging, making bowel

\textsuperscript{19} It is important to note that all material on “poop talk” used in the questionnaire comes from programs aired on private TV stations. There are many programs on similar topics on NHK, the national public broadcasting organization, and these are designed from a more medical perspective.
movement on par with any other health indicators, such as headaches. Because of the accepted connection between regular evacuation and health conditions, much importance is put into educating (mainly) children about their bowel movement. Examples of educational manifestations of excrement constitute the education realm, which is a natural outgrowth of the health one. The third category, the commodity realm, does not stem directly from the health aspect. Indeed, what originally enabled manifestations of excrement in public was its health connotations, but examples categorized in the last group use scatological concepts for profit. I argue this is the utmost example of high social visibility of excrement in Japan.

Moreover, this paper indicates some issues that need further investigation: 1) majority of the negative comments regarding manifestations of excrement in Japan come from respondents from the so-called Western cultural sphere; 2) difference between notion and practice of defecation – scatological concepts are generally accepted, while the actual practice is more stigmatized; 3) cute makeover of the poop image and its possible relation to the development of sanitation technology in the 1970s-80s.

A thorough examination of these questions was beyond the scope of the paper, but they will orientate the direction of my future research.

Finally, it is important to note that Japan is not the only country with symbolic manifestations of excrement: Taipei has a “Modern Toilet” restaurant in the popular Ximending district where clients eat dishes from mini toilet bowls; similar toilet-themed restaurant called “Poop Cafe Dessert Bar,” inspired by the Taiwanese original, is in Toronto; South Korea houses many poop-related attractions, such as “Poopoo Land” in Seoul; and Prague Zoo opened a new permanent exhibition on the world of animal excrement in May 2019. Recently, The Guardian article even argued that poo is no longer taboo (Robinson 2019). Nonetheless, it is Japan that gained a reputation as the country obsessed with poop and toilets. Why?

First, I suggest orientalism is to blame. The way Japan has been represented in the West tends to be problematic: West is considered the norm, and Japan is the weird Other. What adds to such comparisons is the fact that Japan is arguably one of the most Westernized countries in Asia, ______

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20 For a list of poop-related attractions in South Korea see In South Korea, People Are Going Crazy for These Poop-Centric Attractions (Ladner 2018).
thus any differences in Westerner’s eyes might become even more apparent.

Second, Japan’s high-tech toilets are the paragon of hygienic modernity. As it was mentioned throughout the paper, Western-style toilets embody negative attitudes toward defecation. Consequently, the more advanced a country’s toilets are, the lower social visibility of excrement becomes. Japan, however, has probably the most advanced toilets in the world, but, as this paper highlighted, symbolic manifestations of excrement are in abundance. I contend this ambiguity plays a significant role in why it is Japan that got the “poop-obsessed country” label. With this in mind, however, I suggest that instead of wondering why poo doesn’t really fall into any of the taboo categories here in Japan, it may be just as, or even more, valid to ask why poo has been forever locked inside those “Do Not Touch / Do Not Talk About” taboo boxes in other, notably Western, countries.

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