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Regulations and Media Literacy Education On Online Obscene Harmful Information: A Japanese Perspective*

By Mayuko WATANABE**

Abstract

This paper presents a Japanese perspective on measures against online obscene information. A research question is set on what kinds of measures are required in order to protect youth from the harmful influence of online obscene information. The paper firstly examines measures initiated by both national and local governments as well as by cell phone carriers, and secondly explores how to protect youth from potential online obscene dangers toward them. Lastly, the paper investigates the impact of online obscene information on Japanese young people's behaviors and values in comparison with that of other countries in an attempt to provide the basis for accurate measures. The results of the research found that online obscene information has some significant impact on young people, including the increase of the curiosity for obscene crimes.

Keywords: Media literacy; Internet education; Mobile communications;
Contents regulation; Harmful information; Child pornography

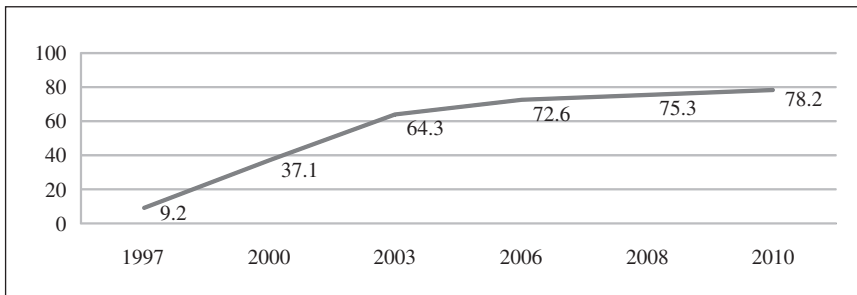
Introduction

The number of Internet users in Japan has increased since the middle of 1990s. By 2010, 78.2 per cent of population has been able to access the Internet¹ as shown in Table 1, just like in other countries, such as England, Canada and Korea². While Personal Computers (PCs) in these countries are mainly used as the Internet connecting tools³, however, in Japan, cellular phones are also major devices for this purpose, particularly among young people.

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Table 1: Diffusion of the Internet



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2011

A survey conducted by the Japan Cabinet Office in 2010 shows that 97.1 per cent of high school students have their own cell phones, 45.7 per cent in junior high schools, and 18.6 per cent in elementary schools, respectively (Table 2). Among these students, 99.4 per cent of high school students have the Internet connection via cell phones, 97.0 per cent in junior high schools, and 85.6 per cent in elementary schools, respectively. Students tend to be addicted to the Internet, as some 40 per cent of them in high school use the Internet more than two hours per day. On the contrary, the number of students who have their own PCs or laptops is quite small: 11.7 per cent of students in high schools, 6.7 per cent in junior high and 2.6 per cent in elementary schools have their own PCs or laptops. As to the diffusion of smart phones, the number is 2.6 per cent in junior high school and 3.9 per cent in high school.

Table 2: Ownership rate of Cell Phones Among Students (per cent)

	High school	Junior high school	Elementary school
Cell phone ownership	97	46	19
Internet connection via cell phones	99	97	86
PCs or Laptops ownership	12	7	3

Source: Japan Cabinet Office, 2010

One factor that contributes significantly to the popularity of the cell phone among youth can be its high functionality. Cell phones made in Japan are quite sophisticated, even from a global perspective. Even with standard handsets, users

are able to send e-mails, take photos and movies, connect to the Internet, watch TV, listen to music, and pay bills and fees with e-money (“Osaifu Ke-tai”). Since these functions are so substantial, youth choose to use cell phones instead of PCs or laptops that are less portable and more expensive.

The moderate cost for the Internet access service through the cell phones is another factor that leads youth to actively connect to the Internet via cell phones. In Japan, cell phone operators provide monthly fixed-rate service for the Internet access. The rate is from 6,000 yen to 7,000 yen, which is lower than the cell phone’s Internet access fee in Finland and Canada where the flat-rate service is not popular yet⁴. Therefore, Japanese youth are able to surf the Internet with their cell phones as much as they want, without worrying about expenses.

However, their heavy usage of the Internet via cell phones has caused many problematic cases, involving obscene exploitation of them. The number of young people who were assaulted by strangers they met on dating sites or SNS has been increasing. In order to solve this problem, regulations on the cell phone usage and media literacy education for youth have emerged in Japan.

This paper firstly examines measures initiated by both national and local governments as well as by cell phone carriers, and secondly explores how to protect youth from potential online obscene dangers toward them. Lastly, the paper investigates the impact of online obscene information on Japanese young people’s behaviors and values in comparison with that of other countries in an attempt to provide the basis for accurate measures.

Online Obscene Harmful Information in Japan

Young people’s heavy usage of the Internet via cell phones has caused many problematic cases, including sexual exploitation of them. Here, the term “Online obscene harmful information” means the contents that disturb the healthy growth of youth, including obscene stimulating information (Youth Internet Environmental Development Act, 2008).

Various harmful information on sex can be seen on mobile Web sites in Japan. An example is “an Internet dating site,” where people introduce themselves and communicate to find a date for a casual relationship. The site is often criticized as a hot bed for child prostitution. The number of young people who have become victims of obscene assaults through such Internet dating sites has reached 254 in 2010 (National Police Agency 2011), and about 99 per cent of them used cell phones to access the sites. A typical scenario of such a crime is the following: First, a child (usually a girl) would make friends with a stranger on a dating site; then she would be lured by him to meet outside. When they meet, he would put her in his car and sexually violate her. There are numerous assaults to mention: For example, “a child was forced to take a sleeping pill, and her naked photographs were

taken,” “carved a tattoo to a body,” “was forced to take stimulants, and obscenely assaulted” and so on.

Today, there is another new mobile Web site called “purofu,” which is overwhelmingly supported by youngsters. The “purofu” (an abbreviation for “profile”), a Web site that lets users post their profiles, launched the service in 2002. Users disclose their personal information, including their full names, their dates of birth, names of school, and their resident areas. Similar to Facebook, the site enables users to post their photos and journal entries, and a third-party could write a comment on them. According to an investigation that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology carried out at the end of 2008, more than 40 per cent of the eleventh graders access the “purofu.” If it is among only high school girl from metropolitan areas, the per cent age even rises to over 70 per cent. On the other hand, only 20 per cent of parents are aware that their child uses the “purofu.” In addition, the “purofu” is recently used as a place of compensated dating. Girls would post their half-naked images on the site and recruit potential partners for compensated dating. Some adults also post a message, which suggests prostitution as “a recruitment of a girl who look for petty cash,” and send a message as if a obscene intercourse for money were an easy way to make money. The number of youngsters who became victim to obscene assaults through the “purofu” and other SNS that are not “Internet dating sites” accounts for 792 in 2008 and 1239 in 2010 (National Police Agency, 2011), both of which exceed that of dating sites. It can be considered that the reinforcement of a regulation on such dating sites has led crime location to shift to other sites, including the “purofu.”

Regulations on Online Obscene Information

In Japan, where most young people access the Internet via their cell phones, more regulations on mobile Web site are made than those of the PCs. The Cabinet Office enforced the “Youth Internet Environmental Development Act” as Evidence-based Policy in April 2009. This law imposed an obligation for cell phone enterprises to offer a “filtering service” to cell phones used by those who are under 18 years old. This filtering service sorts out illegal and harmful information on mobile Web sites so that the youngsters cannot access the information. The law also obliged guardians to report a cell phone enterprise in making a cell phone contract for their children who are under 18 years old. The enterprise is not allowed to remove the filtering service without the proposal from a guardian.

In response to this regulation, the mobile carriers made more convenient filtering service available. The filtering can be set at several levels for limited content, depending on a user’s age and circumstance. In addition, the cell phone made specifically for youngsters has a function to sort out unwanted e-mails and to limit partners of incoming and outgoing calls only to their family members.

As for the criteria for harmful sites, the Cabinet Office at first insisted that the government should decide them. However, the Internet industry and mass communication companies strongly opposed to the Cabinet Office for fear of infringing “the freedom of expression,” and therefore, a private enterprise was entrusted to set the standard.

The standard for filtering offered by the private company divides the content of mobile Web sites that should be restricted into 73 categories, including “SNS,” “gambling,” and “adult.” However, current filtering service is not sophisticated enough, sorting out all the information whether it is from communication among friends or from information from public organizations. Therefore, young people tend to avoid using the service.

As of 2010, the usage rate of the filtering among students is 58 per cent in elementary schools, 64 per cent in junior high schools, and only 48 per cent in high schools (Japan Cabinet Office, 2010). In addition, youngsters often forge written consents of their parents to remove the filtering. It seems that keeping the filtering service on their cell phones is regarded as nerdy among them.

In the meantime, administrative guidance on the possession of cell phones advances as well. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology notified the Board of Education of the entire country ban students from carrying their cell phones in the elementary and junior high schools in 2009. Judging from a survey conducted by the Ministry in 2008, it is clear that 94 per cent of elementary schools and 99 per cent of junior high schools prohibited students from bringing their cell phones to schools.

Furthermore, there is a local government that has recommended parents not to provide cell phones to their children. The local government in Ishikawa prefecture enforced the first regulation nationwide in January 2010, which determined that a guardian should not give a child a cell phone if a child is a primary or secondary student, except for a purpose of crime prevention. No punitive clause is followed to the regulation. This regulation was formed by a suggestion from the Liberal Democratic Party members of the Diet, as the cell phone-related issues had prevailed in the prefecture. According to my interview with the prefectural government, the schoolteachers welcome the regulation, thinking that it is now easy to have guardians and students pay attention to this matter.

However, even if the regulation prohibits possession of cell phones, there are still many other methods of accessing the Internet, such as an Internet cafe or a game console. The claim “what is important is to educate youth how to use the mobile Internet safely, not to just regulate them” can be heard within the prefecture, too. The prefecture now requires each school to make a presentation to students on the potential danger of the mobile Web sites once a year. However, a person of the prefectural government who is in charge of the regulation says that the know-how of the Internet education is still insufficient and that they expect to forward the

education while exchanging information with other prefectures.

Media Literacy Education

Media Literacy is the combined ability of criticizing media's characteristics, techniques and impacts and using media to express oneself (Watanabe, 2007). Japanese school education does not have a subject specialized in teaching media literacy. While schools may let students experience media production during the course of integrated study, they do not pay enough attention to teaching students the main element of media literacy—how to criticize media.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, on the other hand, enforced elementary school to include a course of utilizing computers in 2002. In the beginning, the lesson was simply involved in the operation of the PC. In 2009, the course of study eventually added a new purpose of “acquiring information morals” as a non-binding target. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology defines the information morals education as “a way of thinking and manner that all citizens should acquire in surviving the information-based society and developing it into a sound society.” The education could foster students' judgement to critically examine obscenely harmful information available online and to understand the danger of the Internet bullying. The information morals education is to be implanted in the course of technical home economics in junior high school curriculum, and in informatics in senior high school curriculum.

However, teaching materials and guidance methods are not yet established, as the budget for and experiences of teachers are not sufficient. At the same time, teachers claim that they do not understand how to teach information morals. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology plans to dispatch an expert of the Internet education to each school who can facilitate teachers with guidance methods, and the Ministry prepares to hold workshops for teachers. In addition, private groups have started developing the Internet teaching materials for schools.

Media literacy education for guardians is another important issue. There are many cases that guardians, without the understanding of the potential danger of the mobile Internet, give their children cell phones easily. At the local government level, several prefectures have begun to develop Awareness-raising Strategy for guardians. The Mie prefecture's Board of Education distributes a guidebook, titled “An Internet/Cell Phone Safety Guidebook” to guardians. The guidebook includes such information as “the Internet can specify a person who wrote a comment on a Web site” and “parents should make rules for their children's cell phone usage time.” The board also holds a training session for volunteers who monitor harmful information online and a workshop in the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA).

The similar actions have been observed in Toyama, Niigata, Aichi, Kagoshima prefectures.

However, it is the guardians with a high level of consciousness on their children who participate in the PTA meetings and read the distributed papers. A common issue among local governments is that they cannot reach the parents whom they need to educate. According to a survey conducted by Symantec in 2009, only 22 per cent of parents in Japan have told their children about safe usage of the Internet, and the per cent age is the lowest among the countries participated in the survey. While it is considered to be a domestic issue, it is required from schools that they offer workshops in an environment where guardians certainly get together, such as an entrance ceremony or a commencement.

Mobile carriers have also begun to emphasize on such education. Each carrier dispatches employees to schools to teach students safe usage of the cell phone. This lecture is called “the delivery of the class.” In the case of KDDI, one of the major mobile carriers in Japan, the company is also in charge of training guardians and school staff. There were some 1,000 applications for the KDDI’s delivery of the class from the city’s Board of Education in the entire country in 2009. Although schools tend to ask the police for the delivery of the class on the cell phone usage, the police ask KDDI to substitute, as the number of requests is too large to respond.

KDDI mainly teaches the manner of the cell phone usage for the primary school students, including time and place to use the cell phone. When the company teaches junior high students, they cover a method of avoiding troubles, such as not exposing personal information in the “purofu.” According to my hearing at KDDI, the company delivers the class to reduce a negative side of the cell phone usage as a business risk.

However, their lecture is based on a premise that students possess cell phones. Therefore, the schools that do not want students to have them, like those in Ishikawa prefecture, never ask the lecture.

Method

This paper measures the impact of online obscene information on Japanese youngsters’ behaviors and values in comparison with other three countries: Korea, Finland and Canada⁵. The study was conducted between July and November, 2009. The samples in the study included 123 university students in Japan, 105 in Korea, 108 in Finland, and 17 in Canada. Finland and Canada are together considered to be “West.” Respondents were asked to complete questionnaires.

The demographics of the sample are summarized as follows: The male students consisted of 36.9 per cent (Japan 48.8 per cent, Korea 47.6 per cent, West 15.6 per cent), and female 60.0 per cent (Japan 45.5 per cent, Korea 49.5 per cent,

West 83.6 per cent), as shown in Table 3. In addition, 88.9 per cent of the students were undergraduate students (Japan 89.4 per cent, Korea 96.2 per cent, West 81.9 per cent), 8.0 per cent master students (Japan 6.5 per cent, Korea 1.9 per cent, West 14.7 per cent), and 0.3 per cent doctorate students.

Respondents were between 18 to 25 years old or over. Among them students aged from 18 to 20 consisted of 27.4 per cent (Japan 49.6 per cent, Korea 7.6 per cent, West 22.1 per cent); those who are aged between 21 and 24 consisted of 54 per cent (Japan 44.7 per cent, Korea 73.3 per cent, West 45.1 per cent), and 25 or over comprised 18 per cent (Japan 4.9 per cent, Korea 17.14 per cent, West 32.8 per cent).

Table 3: Number of Respondents by Gender in Japan, Korea and 'West'

(Figures in parenthesis are per cent)

	Japan	Korea	'West'	Total
Males	60 (48.8)	50 (47.6)	19 (15.6)	129 (36.9)
Females	56 (45.5)	52 (49.5)	102 (83.6)	210 (60.0)
N/A	7 (5.7)	3 (2.9)	1 (0.8)	11 (3.14)
Total	123 (35)	105 (30)	122 (35)	350 (100)

Source: The research conducted by Sugaya, Watanabe& Kim in 2009 (Unpublished Paper)

Results

The research examines the followings: How many youngsters refer to obscene information online for their own obscene activities and what kind of impact the online pornography has on their view on their opposite gender.

According to the survey results, 18.8 per cent of the respondents in West, 6.7 per cent in Korea, and 2.4 per cent in Japan have written their own obscene experiences on PC Web sites, such as message boards, and 3.2 per cent of respondents among participating four countries have written their own obscene experiences on mobile Web sites. In contrast, the results also indicates that higher per cent age of the respondents have read obscene experiences of others on PC Web sites; 45.5 per cent in Japan, 73.4 per cent in Korea, and 58.2 per cent in West. In addition, 31.7 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 5.7 per cent in Korea, and 3.3 per cent in West have read other people's obscene experiences on mobile Web sites. As to a method of discussing the respondents' concerns about sex, 73 per cent of them chose face-to-face conversation. However, 17 per cent of people preferred talking online via SNS or message boards, which comprised the second largest group.

For the regulation on the online obscene expression, 36.6 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 52.4 per cent in Korea, and 46.8 per cent in West favored the regulation. On the other hand, 30.1 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 15.3 per cent in Korea, and 18.8 per cent in West did not support the regulation, as shown in Table 4. This result shows that Japan had the highest per cent age of people not supporting the regulations on online obscene expression.

The respondents were asked to choose the reason for their answers in the questionnaires. Among those who preferred the regulation, 65.7 per cent of them selected the reason that “it may give a child distorted obscene information”; 16.1 per cent of them chose “the human rights of the woman are not protected”; and 10.4 per cent chose the reason that “it disturbs study.” The following answers were also collected through open-end questions: “online obscene information is addictive,” “child pornography should not be forgiven,” “it is uncomfortable to see what I do not want to see,” and “the regulation leads technical progress.” Among the respondents who did not support the regulation, 42.7 per cent chose the reason that “the regulation infringes the freedom of expression,” 33.3 per cent chose the reason that “the regulation is impossible on the Internet,” and 17.7 per cent chose the reason that “the online obscene information has no influence on viewers.”

Table 4: Preference for the Regulation on Online Obscene Expression (per cent)

	Japan	Korea	‘West’
Quite agreeable	18.70	25.70	19.70
Agreeable	17.90	26.70	27.10
Neither	32.50	31.40	32.00
Not quite agreeable	21.10	10.50	16.40
Disagree	9.00	4.80	2.50
Missing	0.81	0.95	2.46

Source: The research conducted by Sugaya, Watanabe& Kim in 2009 (Unpublished Paper)

The questionnaire also contained some questions on online child pornography. The result indicates that 20.3 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 34.3 per cent in Korea, and 33.6 per cent in West have viewed online pornography with a real child involved on PC Web sites. In addition, 10.5 per cent of the respondents in Japan,

2.9 per cent in Korea, 4.9 per cent in West have viewed online pornography with a real child involved on mobile Web sites. As for the pornography with an illustration of a child in an animated cartoon format—which is not illegal in Japan—26.1 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 32.4 per cent in Korea, and 29.5 per cent in West have viewed it on PC Web sites, and 15.4 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 4.8 per cent in Korea, 3.3 per cent in West have viewed one on mobile Web sites. The survey results demonstrate that the Japanese students accounts for the biggest number of respondents who accessed the illustrated child pornography via the cell phones.

As for the Web sites concerning obscene crimes (including the crimes against adults), such as a pervert, rape, imprisonment rape, voyeurism, and indecent assault, in order to satisfy obscene interest, 39.9 per cent of the respondents in Japan, 60.0 per cent in Korea, and 21.3 per cent in West have viewed these Web sites.

The impact of online obscene information

The respondents were asked what kind of feelings they would have by viewing obscene information online. According to the results, 40 per cent of the respondents chose the answer that “it gives me an idea of how to make money,” 30 per cent of them chose the answer that “I feel loathsomeness,” and 4.5 per cent chose the answer that “it raises my obscene curiosity to a child,” as shown in Table 5. Moreover, the respondents who felt that “I want to have a obscene intercourse with a child” consisted of 4.5 per cent, the answer that “having a obscene intercourse with a child is acceptable” consisted of 2.5 per cent, and “forced intercourse is not unpleasant for a child” consisted of 2.5 per cent.

As for the Web sites concerning obscene crimes, 68 per cent of the respondents felt “loathsomeness,” 9.3 per cent of them felt that “obscene curiosity to such obscene crimes,” and 3.1 per cent felt that “it gives me an idea of how to make money,” as shown in Table 6. Furthermore, the respondents who felt that “I want to commit such obscene crimes on women” consisted of 1.5 per cent, the answer “forcing a obscene intercourse to a woman is acceptable” consisted of 1.0 per cent, and the answer “forced intercourse is not unpleasant for a woman” consisted of 1.0 per cent.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that online obscene information has been viewed by many young people. As for the access to PC Web sites with obscene expression (i.e., in a swimsuit/a nude figure, a sexy animated cartoon, and an indecent promo word), West reached nearly 80 per cent, and Japan and Korea are around 40 per cent. Japan stood out with nearly 30 per cent of the respondents accessing obscene

sites from their cell phones, which suppressed the other countries with less than 10 per cent. This is due to this tendency peculiar to Japan, where the Internet usage via the cell phone has prevailed.

Table 5: Feelings Evoked by Viewing Child Pornography Online

	(per cent) N = 350
It gives me an idea of how to make money	40
I feel loathsomeness	30
It raises my obscene curiosity to a child	4.5
I want to have a obscene intercourse with a child	4.5
Having a obscene intercourse with a child is acceptable	2.5
Forced intercourse is not unpleasant for a child	2.5

Source: The research conducted by Sugaya, Watanabe& Kim in 2009 (Unpublished Paper)

Table 6: Feelings Evoked by Viewing the Web sites on Obscene Crimes

	(per cent) N = 350
I feel loathsomeness	68
It raises my curiosity to such obscene crimes	9.3
It gives me an idea of how to make money	3.1
I want to commit such obscene crimes on women	1.5
Forcing a obscene intercourse to a woman is acceptabe	1.0
Forced intercourse is not unpleasant for a woman	1.0

Source: The research conducted by Sugaya, Watanabe& Kim in 2009 (Unpublished Paper)

The obscene information on the Internet also served a role of the “word-of-mouth communication.” 70 per cent of the respondents in Korea read obscene experiences of others on PC Web sites, which is the highest among the participating four countries. Since Korean people maintain the moral of Confucianism which does not allow people to talk about sex publicly, the respondents in the country are considered to depend on the online information. As for the number of people who have written their own obscene experiences on PC Web sites, 20 per cent of

the respondents in West have done, which is the highest among the participating countries. In those countries where people are considered to be more open about sex than Asian people and where the filtering of obscene sites is not popular, reading and exchanging obscene information online might be done more openly.

The students did not take the present conditions lightly that obscene information can be seen on the Internet. Women in particular considered obscene expressions to be unpleasant. According to the survey results, 51 per cent of women preferred regulations on online obscene expressions, while 34 per cent of men did so. However, when concentrating on the result of Japan, some 30 per cent of men and women considered regulations unfavorable, while around 10 per cent in Korea and West considered the same way. Japanese youngsters have a chance to encounter obscene expressions more frequently in a convenience store or on an advertisement in a train than those in many other countries. The result indicates that Japanese respondents had a low level of consciousness to regulations on obscene expressions.

An alarming result has been brought up about the influence of the online obscene information on young people. According to the survey results, regarding the impression of viewing a child pornography site, there are 4.5 per cent of respondents who chose the answers respectively “it raises my obscene curiosity to a child,” and “I want to have a obscene intercourse with a child.” As for Web sites concerning an act (a pervert or rape) considered to be a obscene crime to women in order to satisfy obscene interest, nearly 10 per cent of the respondents answered that they feel “obscene curiosity for such obscene crimes.” In consideration of a present condition that high rate of obscene crimes targeting not only youngsters but also adults⁶, the ideal method of regulations and education on pornography should be further investigated.

Conclusion

In Japan where the cell phones with high functions have prevailed, the number of young people with the Internet access via their cell phones is much higher compared to that of other countries. The troubles around the mobile Web sites are frequently seen. Violations of child prostitution/child pornography prohibitive law, obscene assaults, and compensated dating (obscene intercourse for money) through the “purofu” are numerous to mention. Adult Web sites containing images of women obscenely assaulted can be seen by people under 18 years old in an uncontrolled manner. In addition, despite the number of victims of child pornography is increasing, the Japanese Government has made it legal as long as pornography does not involve a real child.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has set information morals education as a non-binding target, but the teaching materials

and the guidance method are not yet established. On the other hand, the some regulations have been implemented. The Cabinet Office has obliged people under 18 years old to use the filtering service; the local governments have established a regulation to prohibit youngsters from possessing cell phones.

The results of the research found that online obscene information has some significant impact on young people. It catches many young people's eyes and serves the role as "the word-of-mouth communication." Young people who watch Web sites containing child pornography or obscene crimes may increase their curiosity to have obscene intercourse with a child or their curiosity for obscene crimes.

In order to protect the youth from the bad influence of online obscene information, simply keeping youngsters away from harmful information is not sufficient. Media literacy education that improves their judgment ability so that they do not accept all obscene information on faith is strongly required.

NOTES

1. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the diffusion of the Internet was 9.2 per cent in 1997, and 57.8 per cent in 2002.
2. Sugaya, Watanabe & Kim (2010) reported the diffusion of the Internet in the major countries as follows: 70 per cent in England, 84 per cent in Canada, and 71 per cent in Korea.
3. See Sugaya, Watanabe & Kim (2010).
4. Countries such as Finland, UK, Canada, and Korea (Sugaya, Watanabe, & Kim 2010)
5. This study is part of a larger research project on the international comparison of regulations and media literacy education on online obscene information. The research was supported by the Yoshida Hideo Memorial Foundation.
6. According to the statistics by Japan National Police Agency (2008), the number of acknowledged rape victims under aged 19 was 695, and aged between 20 and 49 was 850.

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