

Fig. 1: A host club decked out for Valentine's Day (Image by the author).



Selling Intimacy under Post-Industrial Capitalism

An Ethnography of Japanese Host Clubs

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There are over 15,000 hosts in Japan, who bring millions of yen a year into the ailing economy by providing emotional and physical (but not sexual) intimacy to women – you can feel like a princess for the night, if you have the means. According to both domestic and foreign media, they are all conniving, exploitative low-lives, conning naïve women out of sometimes tens of thousands of yen, and even forcing some into prostitution. What follows is a snapshot of how Japan has responded to the changing needs of female consumers in today's post-industrial capitalist economy, which has come to rely increasingly on the sale and purchase of emotion, feeling, and affect. Host clubs are but one – lucrative – player in the global traffic of human emotion.

Host clubs: where romance and capitalism collide

Otoya, a 22-year-old who had been in the host club industry since he was 19, pursed his childish lips in concentration, flicking his dyed brown hair off his face and fiddling with the sparkling stud in his ear. Dance music pulsed around us, making it all but impossible to hear – all the better to make a customer lean in close. At the table next to us, a heavily made-up host in a slim-fitting grey suit gesticulated wildly to a woman erupting in peals of high-pitched laughter. At another table the most popular host in the club was gazing with rapt attention at the screen of his customer's bejewelled iPhone, nodding earnestly as she talked. One would be forgiven for thinking this is a bar full of couples. But it is all, quite literally given the constant plumes of cigarette smoke snaking their way up towards the mirror tiled ceiling, smoke and mirrors. "When people say hosts sell dreams, it's because we're entertainers. Like Disneyland and Mickey Mouse – Disneyland is the land of dreams, and Mickey helps people to dream. But not everyone can go to Disneyland, so

they come here." Otoya placed his hand on my leg reassuringly: "I'll be back in a second, okay?" He hurried over to fondly greet a smiling young woman waiting for him on another sofa.

At the most basic level, hosts are young men who provide pseudo-romance (*gijirenai* 疑似恋愛) to multiple women for sometimes exorbitant amounts of money. A visit to a host club in itself is not expensive, about £30 for an hour – but this does not include drinks, which are only sold by the bottle with a huge markup. The club where I carried out the bulk of my research charged £80 for a bottle of alcohol that would cost £10 in a supermarket. This is what makes bills jump; women compete for their favourite host's attention by buying more bottles of alcohol, and it is this system of picking favourites that is the lifeblood of the host club. The first visit resembles a speed-dating event: you talk to a new host every 10-15 minutes, and at the end of the hour you are encouraged to choose one to invite back to your table for a longer conversation. From then on, he is your *shimei* (指名), or designated host; whenever you go to the club, he is the one you talk to. It is a permanent relationship. It relies on a host not just being

attentive to his customer's likes and dislikes, but also on his ability to mould himself into what she is looking for that evening. He is responsible for her emotional wellbeing and enjoyment for the hour or two she is in the club.

Understanding the dynamics of the *shimei* system and the relationships forged within allows a deeper understanding of why women spend so much on hosts. They have the ability to make you feel like you are in a long-term relationship with someone who knows your likes and dislikes, how to make you smile, and how you like to be talked to, but with all the poorly concealed looks, sexual tension, and flattery (all perfectly timed, of course) that comes with a first date. Hosts peddle pseudo-romance to their customers, pretending to harbour genuine feelings of affection, even love, for them for monetary gain. This business strategy is known as *irokoi* (色恋), "sweet words and behaviour used to make the customer believe she is his [the host's] girlfriend." One host I asked confirmed, "It's when you say things like 'I like you so much' to a customer even when you don't." They are the walking, smooth talking, besuited typification of emotional labour, which "requires one to

induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."¹

Although many are quick to scorn or pity regular customers for paying for a romantic fantasy, both my own and others' research found that most women are fully aware of the nature of the industry. They are under no illusions that their *shimei* actually has feelings for them. The overarching narrative of host club patronisation, that women are helpless victims, does nothing to credit the agency of women, and is testament to how entrenched the black-and-white rhetoric of victimisation/exploitation versus free choice is in discussions of sex and sex-related work.

Contrary to popular, Western belief, hosts are not male escorts. Like everyone employed in the *mizu shobai* (水商売, adult oriented entertainment industry), for all their flirtatious banter and professions of love, they are not paid for sexual acts (within the host club at least – it is perfectly possible to organise a dalliance outside of working hours). They are paid for their ability to create a fantasy, an illusion of intimacy. Indeed, a lot of hosts, including some of my own interviewees, say that their job is *yume wo uru* (夢を売る): "to sell dreams." And some women prostitute themselves to obtain these dreams: the majority of customers are indeed sex workers.² Explanations – or, more accurately, speculations – about women's motivations abound. The general consensus is that Japanese women, sex worker or otherwise, desperately need respite from the subjugation and chauvinism of their male partners. Host clubs are presented as a simple case of role reversal, where women can finally be the beneficiaries of the servitude they are expected to provide. During my month of fieldwork in Osaka, almost all of my informants, not only hosts but men and women who were employed in other parts of the sprawling adult entertainment industry, were quick to correct my assumption that women's interactions with hosts acted as an escape from the emotional and physical tolls of their jobs as hostesses and sex workers. It was, they argued, much more nuanced:

"A woman [who doesn't go to host clubs] goes for the first time. She ends up getting really into it, but doesn't have enough money, so she ends up working in the sex industry so she can see her host and make him the highest ranking in the club."

I set out armed with a research question: why do women go to these clubs? What emerged was a commodity chain, where romance was constantly bought and sold, women and men exploiting and being exploited, all under the watchful eye of post-industrial capitalism, created by the coupling of affective labour with the commodification of care and intimacy.

Consumption of the "chivalrous" West

Few countries consume the West with as much ardour as Japan. One of the most successful imports has been romance – along with baseball, Disney, and Tommy Lee Jones. From the hordes of mainly white male English teachers to the Hollywood-produced rom-coms showing across the country's cinemas and televisions, the message is clear: romantic relationships are about sentiment, declarations of love, and 'the chase.' Western notions of what heteronormative intimacy entails have struck a particular chord with young women, who have had more time and inclination to engage with the West through foreign travel, language learning, and interracial relationships.

The 1990s saw a considerable proportion of women advancing into the workforce. Unlike previous generations – Japanese women have always been active members of the labour force – for those in the 1990s it was less about necessity and more for 'individualistic' reasons such as to "make money to use freely," "save money for the future," or "to broaden perspective and make friends."³ This new affluence, both monetarily and in terms of personal growth, led to a "profound questioning of domestic

Japanese expectations concerning the female life course,¹⁴ as many began to interact with the West further than 10 years of compulsory English language education would take them. We can frame this within the so-called ‘consciousness gap,’ with men clinging to a dogged desire for stay-at-home wives, whereas women increasingly wish for a “partner” with whom to share housework, interests, and values. The fetishisation of (white) Western men is a mainstay of Japanese media, where they appear as sensitive, ladies first gentlemen, shining beacons of egalitarianism to brighten the dark shadow of their Japanese counterparts’ sexism. Many women who seek eroticised internationalism subscribe to a binary of a regressive, chauvinistic Japan versus the sophisticated, liberal West. They often frame praise for foreign men against derision of Japanese ones.

Fanning the flames of this Occidentalist fantasy are the numerous societal constraints that have rendered many men unwilling or, crucially, *unable* to lavish the same attention on their partners that foreign men supposedly do. Japanese men are supposed to be breadwinners, devoting their time to their company rather than their partner’s needs and desires. In Japan, there are still few ways to be a man, and forsaking one’s personal life working until the last train and drinking with colleagues (rarely willingly) is part of the narrow definition of masculinity. The corporate culture that is essential to the maintenance of a masculine identity has led to the absence of husbands from the home, as well as to men who have few interests outside of work, creating ‘one-dimensional,’ unresponsive partners. Hosts, on the other hand, embody the so-called “Three C’s” – comfortable, communicative, cooperative – that women are now said to desire, providing a personal(ised) connection and cultivating a type of intimacy that is not generally forthcoming from the average man.

From the moment you enter a host club [Fig. 1], you are the recipient of unwavering attention. After being led from the darkened lobby, where the top three ranking hosts beaming down at you from framed photographs, you enter the main club to a chorus of “*irashaimase!*” (いらっしやいませ, “Welcome!”). You do not do anything for yourself. Hosts pour your drinks and whip out a lighter the minute they spy a cigarette being produced from a handbag. They escort you to the toilet and wait for you outside, proffering a hot hand towel when you emerge. They hand you a blanket if you are wearing a short skirt to preserve your modesty. Otoyā once tenderly removed my make-up when I had drunk too much to negotiate the removal of false eyelashes, and sent a helper host out to buy me a pack of cigarettes. If you do not finish your bottle of alcohol, a charm with your name written on it will be attached to the bottle, and it will be kept on a shelf ready for your next visit [Fig. 2]. These highly stylised acts of thoughtfulness, which continue until your *shimei* says goodbye to you outside the club when you leave, are a breath of fresh air – or smoke-filled, cologne-laden air – for women, particularly those in the adult entertainment industry, who not only provide the same service to men, but are relentlessly sexualised while doing so. Being given a blanket so people cannot peek at

your underwear is likely to mean a lot to a woman who has spent the evening with a businessman’s hand on her thigh.

In this regard, it is easy to see why a hostess or sex worker might spend her earnings in a host club. After an unproductive evening spent sloping around Sōemonchō, the beating heart of Osaka’s sex trade, having been constantly leered at, one of my field notes read: *I’ve never been so conscious of being an object of men’s gaze. It makes me feel dirty and I want my boyfriend.*

Host clubs – where acts of what for many Japanese women represent non-Japanese expressions of romance and intimacy are replicated to an almost comical degree (I am after all capable of hailing a taxi myself) – can therefore be seen as being born from a desire for clichéd romance that alludes a lot of Japanese men. As Otoyā confirmed, “I don’t think host clubs would be so popular if Japanese men were more into this sort of [kind] treatment.”

Romantic consumption in the service economy

*I want to see you.
I had so much fun with you tonight!
I’d be happy if you came [to the club].
You can’t come tonight?
When can I see you?*

These are some things hosts have said to me in person and over text message. They do not quite capture the subtleties of Japanese, especially the connotations of my doing them a favour by visiting the club, but they are pertinent examples of the emotional labour hosts perform – and, indeed, the essence of this type of labour is one’s ability to perform. Otoyā told me “of course” he messages his customers every day, and although he said that mostly they just talk about “this and that,” the point is that exchanges between a host and his customers are often akin to real romantic relationships; surely one of the marks of a long-term relationship is sending your partner a picture of your new haircut for their estimation (as a host from a different club did). Their service or “performance” (as one interviewee described it) is tailored to each individual. Every host I asked admitted to changing his personality based on the customer. When I asked a former host acquaintance why he left the industry, he replied wearily, “I got tired of being fake.” The work that hosts engage in is the ultimate form of the commercialisation of intimacy, requiring deep acting and considerable effort to manipulate one’s own and others’ feelings.

The modern service economy is predicated on the sale of “a smile, a mood, a feeling, or a relationship.”¹⁵ Take the annual Christmas advert assault, for example: although supermarkets are advertising turkeys, Christmas puddings, and Prosecco by the bucketload, what they promise is warm smiles, grinning relatives, and a general feeling of fuzzy wellbeing and camaraderie. The expansion of services to include emotion and affect on their roster is most often seen as a result of the demographic changes accompanying late modernity, where people have come to rely increasingly on those outside

the home for the affective services previously inside it. Much of the work done on affective labour is predicated on the argument that women are the only ones exploited to provide emotional labour for the consumption of men. Hosts not only confound this assessment but complicate the situation by relying heavily on *fuzokujo* (風俗嬢, female sex workers) to make money. As it neatly encapsulates the pseudo-romance they sell as well as the stylised romantic interactions that take place in the club, emotional labour is a useful analytical lens through which to view the intimate performance of hosts.

A broader approach which encompasses the multitude of affective services on offer in today’s economy comes from Michael Hardt, who uses the term affective labour to describe labour which produces and manipulates emotions. He sees affective labour as one face of immaterial labour. Its products are not tangible goods, but “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community.”¹⁶ Although the products of affective labour are intangible, they often mix with material labour. Hosts flatter and seduce, but their money is ultimately made by how many bottles of alcohol they are able to sell through this immaterial labour, hence why their target customer base is female sex workers, who make enough money to improve the host’s all-important ranking. This is where the affective commodity chain comes into play.

What is the effect of all this affect?

Mr. Harada, seemingly baffled by my entire project, took a drag on his cigarette. I was conducting our interview in a busy family restaurant, but he was unconcerned by the obvious discord between the subject and setting. With the air of someone whose patience is wearing thin explaining something to a child, he told me:

“No you’ve got it wrong, women don’t go to host clubs because their boyfriend doesn’t treat them nicely. They go to a host club and get really wrapped up in it, so turn to sex work so they can earn more money for their host. 80% of host clubs customers are sex workers. They go because the host is like their boyfriend.”

I have been offering possible explanations behind the patronisation of host clubs, attempting to paint a picture of the draw of the intimate and affective services on offer there. In doing this, I hope to have made it clearer why a woman might get attached to a host, to the extent that she is willing to prostitute herself. In this final section, I talk about the affective commodity chain that host clubs are a part of. In this chain, romance, emotion, and affect are the commodities, which constantly flow around the post-industrial capitalist economy in general, and the sex industry in particular. In the context of host clubs, women use men (hosts) for their emotional and affective labour, and are in turn used by them for money. Hosts wield such labour skilfully enough to manipulate women into then selling their own affect to manipulate their customers, in order to earn enough money to continue being exploited by hosts. It is this idea of being *willingly* exploited – few women are actually coerced into the sex industry by hosts – that irrevocably shows us the power of affective relationships. Kana, one of my interviewees, told me that hosts implore a customer, “I can’t be Number 1 without you ...” and other such statements, which lead her to consider working in the sex industry in a way that makes her think she has reached the decision independently.

The emotive power of affective labour is more applicable, I think, to customers who are not already employed in the sex industry when they

start going to host clubs. They enter the industry out of feelings for their *shimei* and to support him – as we all want to do for those we love. Once they are in the sex trade, these reasons are likely to combine with occupational stress, which are alleviated by the soothing attention of one’s *shimei*. Therefore, the chain is kept going by the constant give and take of intimate affect. From what I learned during my fieldwork, I see this group of women as being motivated by

the pseudo-romance on offer to enter into the affective commodity chain. My concept of willing exploitation is a caveat that applies to the structure/agency debates plaguing discussions of commercialised sex work. To be sure, women are emotionally manipulated into spending their money on a host, but for the most part the decision to enter into the adult entertainment or sex trade to win

his affections is a conscious one – a more complicated situation than free choice versus victimisation.

Hosts can provide the personal(ised) connection that some women are looking for in times of evident frailty in long-term relationships and marriage. They can therefore be seen as a reflection and extension of an economy built on the exchange of emotions and relationships. Post-capitalism has gone beyond the provision of service and is now characterised by the demand for authentic and intimate experiences. “The experience economy is all about trading in what makes the heart beat faster,”¹⁷ as people have become satiated with actual things and long to experience rather than own. Japanese female consumers are able to rent the experience of a contrived romantic relationship for the night. Hosts manipulate women out of sometimes hundreds of thousands of yen, but are themselves exploited by their clients who demand their intimate performance. Those who work in the sex economy, some of whom do it to finance their host club visits, are then exploited by their own customers, who in turn provide women with the money to spend in the club. We can see then that it is not a clear-cut binary of exploiter/exploited in the name of post-industrial capitalism; rather, it is a cycle, like an ouroboros eating its own tail. It is outside the remit of this article to explore the affective relationships at work in the sprawling male heteronormative side of Japan’s sex and sex-related trade. But from the side I have been considering, capitalism, with its assurances of personalised service and authentic experiences, has created a constant feedback loop of paid-for intimate practices.

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Notes

- 1 Hochschild, A. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. California: The University of California Press, 7.
- 2 There are two distinct categories of sex work in Japan: the *mizu shobai* and the *fuzoku*. The former does not include penetrative sex, but is still a form of prostitution. I will refer to both as sex work, and women employed in them as ‘sex workers.’
- 3 Iwao, S. 1993. *The Japanese Woman: Traditional image and Changing Reality*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 164.
- 4 Kelsky, K. 2001. *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams*. Durham: Duke University Press, 87.
- 5 Hochschild, A. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. California: The University of California Press, 198.
- 6 Hardt, M. 1999. “Affective Labor.” *Boundary 2* 26(2): 96.
- 7 Ogilvy, J. A. 2002. *Creating Better Futures: Scenario Planning as a Tool for a Better Tomorrow*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 36.



Fig. 2: Unfinished bottles of alcohol. Each bottle has the customer’s name on a label hanging from the neck – another example of calculated thoughtfulness which personalises the experience. The teddy bears on the left are ornaments which fit in with the Japanese ideal of *kawaii* (かわいさ, “cuteness and innocence”) (Image by the author).