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Intimacy for Sale: Masculinity, Entrepreneurship, and Commodity Self in Japan's Neoliberal Situation

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This article examines the creation of entrepreneurial male subjects in Japan's host clubs. Based on my ethnographic study, I argue that hosts' entrepreneurship is constituted by commodifying themselves. This paradoxical – commodified, yet entrepreneurial – male subject is embedded in the new possibilities and constraints posed by Japan's neoliberal restructuring and global economic trends. Hosts, who dream of earning fast cash and achieving upward class mobility, perceive the hosting business as a gateway to success, fame, and luxurious lifestyles. As a result, they 'voluntarily' commodify themselves and feed into the club's profit-making. They are also exploiting the consumer logic of desirability and the neoliberal values of entrepreneurship. By doing so, they hope to better position themselves in contrast to the work ethic and status of Japan's conventionally hegemonic masculine icon, the Salaryman. I contend that neoliberal reform in Japan is not a mere politico-economic reaction to globalization, but a socio-historically specific situation in which individual desires, Japan's social values and ethics, and global economic trends discursively intersect, align, and produce a new mode of attachment to individual freedom and flexible accumulation of capital.

In Japan's ever-popular host clubs, young Japanese men called hosts – '*hosuto*' in Japanese – 'sell' romantic companionship, love, and sometimes sex to indulge their female clients' fantasies, often for exorbitant sums of money. The hosting business, part of Japan's multi-billion dollar sex and entertainment industry, has become a fast-growing commercial enterprise, with an estimated annual revenue of US\$1.4 billion.¹ The phenomenal success of the trade has led to sensationalized media coverage domestically and abroad. While Japanese media tend to represent the host club as a newly thriving business – in marked contrast to Japan's stagnant corporate system – Western media have tended to focus on the novelty of 'feminized' hosts and perceived similarities to Japan's long history of geisha entertainment. *Forbes* magazine, for example, introduced a highly successful host in a 2004 article, 'Memoirs of a Geisha Guy', alluding to the best selling book and movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which portrays Japan as a sensuous, mysterious, and exotic place. In April 2008, CNN.com's front page carried an article entitled, 'Japan's "Geisha Guys", the Latest Accessory', accompanied with a photo of a 'feminine' looking host, which the article declares is an iconic accessory for well-heeled Japanese women.² The article quotes the 'pretty' host as saying, 'Women see us as one of their accessories. . . . They like to wear nice things, so I try to look prettier for them all the time', implying that young Japanese men today are more

¹Fulford, 'Memoirs of a Geisha Guy'.

²Lah, 'Japan's "Geisha Guys" the Latest Accessory'. This photo has been widely circulated on the Internet as a representation of Japanese 'geisha guys'.



FIGURE 1. Image carried on CNN.com. See, for example, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/04/07/japan.geisho/index.html>

feminized than ever in Western eyes and, ironically, subject to the gaze of (supposedly) submissive Japanese women.³

Instead of essentializing the host club as another example of ‘exotic’ Japan, however, I situate the host club phenomenon at the juncture of Japan’s postindustrial consumerism and globalizing neoliberal reformation. The country’s socioeconomic shift from a manufacturing-centered industrial economy to a consumption-oriented one emerged in the 1970s and has led to the formation of a new ‘ideal subjecthood’. Japanese men and women are increasingly embracing the neoliberal values of flexible lifestyle, individual freedom, and entrepreneurial creativity. Host clubs, I will demonstrate, offer a unique vantage point to examine this emergent consumer culture. In these clubs, male hosts and female clients perform as ‘desirable selves’: successful entrepreneurial men and sexually attractive women. In either case, the desirable self inevitably becomes an object of desire to be bought and sold. This ideal subjecthood, in other words, is itself being commodified. Signs, images, and symbolic meanings are produced, circulated, and consumed by both hosts and clients as a means of crafting desirable selves and aspiring to a future of greater consumption possibilities.⁴ In effect, these recent socioeconomic shifts have contingently paved the road to the creation of the so-called ‘neoliberal self-producing subject’.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork and research I have conducted since 2003, this article will focus on the male hosts and show how their self-producing subject paradoxically hinges upon commodification of the self and voluntary subordination to exploitative working conditions. I argue that hosts’ paradoxical – commodified, yet entrepreneurial – subjectivity embodies the above-described postindustrial consumer logic and neoliberal values. To elaborate this point, I first demonstrate how the hosting business attracts young working-class men, who dream of earning fast cash and achieving upward class mobility amid the new constraints and possibilities posed by Japan’s socioeconomic restructuring and global economic trends. I then discuss the ways in which the hosts’ entrepreneurship is entangled with their own desire for

³For the discussion on racialized and feminized images of Japanese (and more broadly, Asian) men in the Western imaginary, see Eng, *Racial Castration*; Fung, ‘Looking for My Penis’; Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 22; Kondo, *About Face*, 75; Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 83; Treat, *Great Mirrors Shattered*. These authors argue that the globally circulating Orientalist discourses reinforce the stereotypical image of Asian men as the passive, feminized, and ‘impotent’ opposite to the white man as progressive, masculine, and mature subject.

⁴Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*; Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Inoue, *Vicarious Language*, 124; Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 65; Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 124; Kondo, *About Face*, 13; Russell, ‘Consuming Passions’, 118.

luxurious lifestyles and sense of freedom. Their desires persist despite the fact that these men knowingly commodify themselves and feed into the club's profit-making. This article then turns to an examination of hosts' tactical use of postindustrial consumer logic and neoliberal values to reconcile the paradox. The tactics that I have observed serve the purpose of positioning men in relation to the work ethic and status of Japan's conventionally hegemonic masculine figures, the selflessly devoted salarymen.⁵ In contrast to the salaryman icon, hosts are self-producing subjects in the sense that they construct their desirable selves through narratives and displays of 'entrepreneurial spirit'. Nonetheless, I argue that their entrepreneurship entails becoming a contract worker and participating in Japan's ongoing labor restructuring.

In so doing, I wish to add a nuanced understanding of the neoliberal self-producing male subject and its relation to intimacy (or a new mode of attachment to certain beliefs, values, and practices). Intimate – physical and emotional – relations are increasingly commodified in sex-related entertainment and tourism, online dating, 'mail-order brides', and a spectrum of personal and domestic affective labor on a global scale.⁶ Feminist scholarship has shed light on the gendered division of this type of labor – females perform physical and emotional labor and males consume and benefit – and has theorized female subordination in relation to patriarchal capitalist systems.⁷ The existing literature on intimacy thus often relies upon dichotomized views such as masculinity versus femininity, domination versus subordination, and subject versus object. I caution that these binaries risk reinforcing intimacy as a women's issue and overlook men like Japanese hosts who also participate in the commodification of intimacy and sex-related work. I intend to avoid reducing this multi-layered complexity to cultural essentialism and instead critically scrutinize this new mode of attachment, the attachment that discursively shapes intimacy for sale and reconfigures the meanings of the self-producing subject.

'Hosting' in Japan's Neoliberal Situation and the Global Economy

Unlike post-socialist China and post-IMF South Korea, Japan has no singular historical benchmark that would indicate a general propensity for neoliberalism; nevertheless, so-called neoliberal traits such as privatization, market deregulation, and corporate restructuring have been promoted consistently since the late 1980s and have accelerated further in more recent times. Neoliberalism in Japan is, as I have argued elsewhere, an ongoing national project with roots in the country's socioeconomic shift since the 1970s.⁸ State-run businesses such as telecommunications and railways have been privatized, these two examples in 1985 and 1987 respectively. The so-called 'Big Bang' financial reforms, initiated in 1996, mandated that Japanese financial sectors meet global standards, which often came with neoliberal demands. The Koizumi

⁵See Allison, *Nightwork*, for the discussion of corporate masculinity; Kondo, *Crafting Selves*, 120, and Kelly, 'Rationalization and Nostalgia' for the perspectives of middle-class salarymen who conduct family businesses and engage in agriculture respectively; Roberson and Suzuki, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan*, for excellent discussions of salarymen hegemony in representation and ideology; Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class*.

⁶Constable, 'The Commodification of Intimacy'.

⁷See Agustín, *Sex at the Margins*; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, *Global Woman*; Parreñas, *The Force of Domesticity*.

⁸Takeyama, 'The Art of Seduction'.

administration (2001–2006) further carried out structural reform to motivate the restructuring of Japan's bureaucratic politico-economic system, encourage entrepreneurial risk-taking, and emphasize individual responsibility so as to revitalize the national economy and its global competitiveness. These reforms have problematized Japan's salarymen-centered 'enterprise society', where group-oriented values and ethics such as hard work (*kinben*), perseverance (*nintai*) and group harmony (*kyōchōsei*) are idealized. Instead, entrepreneurial spirit (*kigyōka seishin*), competitive society (*kyōsō shakai*), and self-responsibility (*jikosekinin*) are valued as the key sources of both individual freedom and socioeconomic liberation (*jiyūka*).⁹ Thus, neoliberal reform is not a mere politico-economic reaction to globalization, but a socio-historically specific situation in which a new mode of attachment to certain changes and values, among others, is idealized by individuals, social institutions, and policy makers.¹⁰ This analytical frame – neoliberalism as a situation – allows us to explore the mode of attachment where global economic trends, Japan's social values and ethics, and individual desires discursively intersect and shape intimacy for sale.

Japan's host club embodies this multi-layered intersection and attracts young working-class and middle-class men. In essence, the Japanese mass media has sensationalized the attractiveness of the hosting business. In the new millennium, a series of TV shows highlighted the success stories of a few young hosts who had become overnight millionaires and achieved celebrity-like fame, appearing all over Tokyo driving new Mercedes-Benzes, wearing fashionable Armani suits, and indulging in the private lounges of upscale hotels. Footage of these individuals amidst such luxury and wealth were juxtaposed with images of salarymen who were stereotypically shown as conformists submerged in faceless collectives, vulnerable to the dangers of corporate restructuring and layoffs.¹¹ This contrast not only stirred the public's curiosity but also cast a shadow on the future vitality of the conventionally hegemonic salaryman model. Most notable is the fact that the hosting business has flourished for more than a decade despite Japan's lackluster economy. While mostly found in the big cities of Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, host clubs have recently spread all over Japan, with an estimated 200 clubs and more than 5,000 hosts plying an increasingly lucrative trade within Tokyo's Kabuki-chō entertainment district alone.¹²

⁹Arai, 'The Neo-Liberal Subject'; Miyazaki, 'Economy of Dreams', 150; Shibuya, *Tamashii no rōdō*; Yoda, 'A Road Map to Millennial Japan'.

¹⁰My definition of 'neoliberal situation' draws upon Arjun Appadurai's concept of the 'commodity situation'. Problematizing conventional thinking about the static nature of commodity, Appadurai has stressed the importance of temporal aspects of commodity. He has proposed to analyze socio-historical situations in which any 'things' become exchangeable for some other thing(s) and how that exchangeability becomes socially relevant; see his *The Social Life of Things*, 13. As discussed above, neoliberalism is not so much about the typology of economic doctrines that determine everyday lives, but rather emerges as an effect of certain social conditions where alternatives to existing values and practices are discursively articulated and practised for betterment: individual freedom, social well-being, and national prosperity. I call this assemblage a neoliberal situation. Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong similarly treat neoliberalism as a situation and assemblage; see Zhang and Ong, 'Introduction', 16. Also see Hoffman, 'Autonomous Choices'; Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*; Rofel, *Desiring China*; and Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis*, for other case studies of neoliberalism as social ethos and practices in socio-historically specific contexts.

¹¹Roberson and Suzuki, 'Introduction', 6–9.

¹²Accurate official numbers are not available. Unofficial estimates suggest that the number of host clubs in Kabuki-chō is 200, employing 5,000 hosts; figures based on Nakatani, *Hosuto-ō ni manabu*, 98, as well as information obtained via interviews.

For many of the young working-class men who do not fit into Japan's corporate system or who abandon salaryman obligations, the host club represents an opportunity to achieve upward mobility – toward luxury, wealth, and elite status – despite social class background. Many are high school dropouts and became hosts after working a variety of part-time jobs (as so-called *freetaa*) in convenience stores, fast food restaurants, and in small-size factories.¹³ Hosts I have interviewed generally viewed the host club as a new employment opportunity and a means of tasting the luxury of Japan's affluent class.

Several hosts I interviewed nominated Horie Takafumi as their role model in entrepreneurship, business management, and life philosophy, a man best known as a former president and CEO of an Internet portal company called Livedoor and author of the 2004 best-selling book *Kasegu ga kachi* [Earning is Winning]. Horie, who is now in his late thirties, launched his venture business with little social and economic capital when he was a college student¹⁴ and remains Japan's most celebrated entrepreneur of the last decade. His office and residence are both located in Tokyo's upscale Roppongi Hills, a breeding ground for business ventures in Japan. His casual persona – no tie or jacket, fearless criticism, and outspoken utterances such as 'money can buy the soul' – symbolizes a new way of doing business and presenting the self. Although he was arrested for violating Japan's stock exchange law in 2006 after a hostile takeover bid, Horie's new style of management, financial engineering skills, and assertiveness in confronting Japan's 'old guard' business establishment captivated the public's imagination and made him a symbol of what Japan's new economy and youth are capable of if only free market forces could be unleashed. Hosts I interviewed before his arrest told me that they aspired to become like Horie and that, for them, hosting is a suitable means of achieving what the young Horie has achieved – success, fame, respect, and financial capital – through 'experience-based' knowledge, speculative tactics, and good luck in Japan's casino-like stock market.¹⁵

In the host club, dubbed by some Japan's 'stock market for romance', hosts' bodies become an investment tool for engineering and expanding the opportunities for their success, fame, and financial gain. Hosts spend many hours of their spare time improving their appearance, body movements, communication skills, and flair for the dramatic in order to appeal to female investors' aesthetics. In terms of appearance, hosts offer a seductive masculine image – slim bodies, salon-tanned skin, trendy hairstyles and expensive designer suits and accessories. They practise stylized ways of lighting cigarettes, walking briskly, and providing seductive gazes and talk to indulge female clients' romantic fantasies. Hosts aim to be attentive companions who are sympathetic and concerned about their clients' everyday concerns and complaints, to make them feel relaxed and happy in and outside the host club. They also respond to customers' romantic inclinations and sometimes submit to requests for more intimate relationships, including after-hours dating and sexual encounters. Their embodied effort is spurred on

¹³Allison, 'The Cool Brand', 98; Yoda, 'A Road Map to Millennial Japan', 656. Allison succinctly summarizes how *freetaa* connotes freedom: 'To freely choose – and change – jobs, and to be freed of a permanent obligation to a company and therefore freed up for other personal interests.' Arai, however, insightfully points out that *freetaa* is another name for the new underclass who serve as the reserve army of labor, in her article, 'The Neo-Liberal Subject'.

¹⁴Horie is from Kyushu and was raised in an 'ordinary' household that consists of his salaryman father and farmer mother. He studied literature at the University of Tokyo but then dropped out after he established his own website development company with his friends and classmates.

¹⁵Strange, *Casino Capitalism*, calls the international financial system since the 1970s 'casino capitalism' and argues that it functions like a gambling hall.

by their hope that the clients will spend money on them. For the working-class hosts, who lack social, economic, and cultural capital, transforming their bodies into commodities is a self-investment to attain high monetary returns, success, and fame. If Horie uses his intellectual capacity and computer skills to succeed in information technology and financial engineering, hosts use their bodily aptitude and seduction skills to achieve success in a similar kind of speculative new economy.

In return for hosts' wide range of attentive service, women visit them in the clubs and spend money on extraordinarily overpriced foods and drinks.¹⁶ A bottle of champagne, for example, costs about 40,000 yen (almost US \$400). The cheapest brand of *shōchū*, a distilled liquor available at most stores for \$7, runs at about \$70 per bottle at host clubs. Dishes such as spaghetti, sautéed vegetables and fruit plates cost about \$50 each. Even if a female customer does not drink or eat, she is expected to pay the entire tab for the table and leave tips to the helper hosts. While an average tab at Fantasy, a high-end host club in Kabuki-chō, is about \$400 for a night's worth of entertainment (an average of two to three hours), a customer can easily spend hundreds and even thousands of dollars more per visit. Women's spending in the host club generates the sales figures on which the hosts' sales ranking and monthly wages solely depend.

For hosts, all effort is focused on pleasing women and increasing their monthly sales, culminating in the coveted 'number one' status – seen by them as the sure path to entrepreneurial success and a well-padded future. (A 'sale' normally proceeds with a customer ordering food and drinks, having conversation, and paying the bill when they leave. At club Fantasy, designated hosts get roughly 40 percent, the club takes the rest.) Hosts dream of achieving 'top-ranking' status and celebrity-like recognition in the club, and many hope to become business owners and eventually manage their own clubs. Most hosts I interviewed idealized (or justified) their hosting job for what it offers in terms of flexible work style, performance-based pay, and the chance to expand their social network. This is in marked contrast to the stereotypical Japan Inc. salaryman job, with long and regimented working hours, minimal incentive, and hierarchical status quo. The entrepreneurial spirit of hosts is also differentiated from that of traditional artisans or entertainers who go through an extended apprenticeship before they can produce finely crafted works of art. Hosts aim to quickly acquire the requisite skills to seduce women for the sake of spectacular monetary gains and social recognition. For them, entrepreneurship is an opportunity to gain worldly rewards – money and fame – rather than a transcendental state of mind or self-mastery, as advocated by the entrepreneurial craftsmen of previous generations.¹⁷ Thus hosts' entrepreneurship mirrors Japan's structural reform, along with the postindustrial economy based on flexible accumulation of capital, that has problematized the salariedmen-centered enterprise society and undermined the traditional values of craftsmanship. Hosts' attitudes have become socially relevant in tandem with the newly promoted entrepreneurial creativity, flexible labor, and quick turnaround in Japan's neoliberal situation mentioned at the beginning of this section. Japan's structural reform since the late 1980s has thus shaped a neoliberal situation in which a new mode of attachment to entrepreneurial spirit and quick financial gain has become socially relevant and even idealized.

¹⁶See Takeyama, 'Commodified Romance', for the portrayal of female clients' fantasies and desires.

¹⁷See Kondo, *Crafting Selves*, 238–240.

This mode of attachment also echoes global economic trends that have shifted from a production-based economy to a consumption-oriented one. The source and origin of wealth have also transformed from mass production of material products to generating value via control over less tangible things such as provision of service, the means of communication, and flows of finance capital.¹⁸ Anna Tsing has called the current form of capital accumulation on a global scale ‘spectacular accumulation’.¹⁹ It is based not on material substance but the potential value a product has to entice investors to speculate on any use and rise. Likewise, potential buyers make purchase decisions based on the product’s appearance. They seek to speculate whether it appeals to other consumers and investors in order to gain social recognition or use it as leverage for higher monetary return. The gist of spectacular accumulation is that the use value of a commodity does not have to be inherent in the product itself but may be created speculatively by its aesthetic packaging and stylizing design, that is, its capacity to appeal. In this logic of commodity value, any thing that has a capacity to appeal, including a human being, can also potentially be turned into a commodity to be bought, sold, and invested. The creation of market value is also open to anyone who has a flair for appealing to consumer needs and making money, regardless of sex, age, and social background. This logic is closely related to the entrepreneurship I have observed in host clubs. Hosts polish their seductive masculine images to appeal to women and entice their female clients into leveraging their commodity values speculatively. Thus, hosts, who embrace a new mode of attachment to entrepreneurial spirit and flexible accumulation of capital, are a constitutive element of the neoliberal situation in Japan and global trends of spectacular accumulation.

An Affect Economy and Casino-Like Opportunity

Success in spectacular accumulation, however, does not simply occur by chance and good luck. Its pursuit entails tireless efforts by the hosts in this ‘stock market for romance’. While hosting itself does not formally require any special skills or knowledge, it demands devoted effort and study in order to become successful. ‘Looking at hosts from a distance, wearing nice suits, driving expensive cars, and showing off good-looking chicks, I thought it was cool and easy. But, I found it was actually not so easy once I became a host,’ said Yoshi, a 24-year old ex-number one host from Osaka I interviewed who had moved to Tokyo specifically to work at Fantasy. Yoshi, who aims to recoup his ‘number one’ status at the club, accentuates every aspect of his physical appearance. He works out at home to sculpt his body, spends money on expensive hair care products, and like other young hosts, occasionally goes to a nail salon to get full service treatment. ‘Women are detail oriented,’ he says. ‘They notice these things’. Indeed, his well cared-for hands are prominently displayed during his carefully constructed body movements such as when he lights a cigarette and grabs an ashtray, gestures with his hands, or simply rests a hand on the table. Here, hosts’ bodies are commodity objects through which hosts aim to appeal to female clients. In this process, hosts become objects onto which women’s fantasies are projected. As entrepreneurial entertainers/salesmen who tirelessly make efforts to evoke female fantasies and convert

¹⁸Comaroff and Comaroff, ‘Millennial Capitalism’, 295. Also see Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*.

¹⁹Tsing, ‘Inside the Economy of Appearance’, 141.

them into economic capital, the effort relies on their own commodified images of their bodies and selves that only potentially trigger women's speculative spending.

The labor hosts provide is considered to be part of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call 'affective labor'. Affective labor produces and manipulates affect such as romantic feelings, companionship, and sense of well-being.²⁰ While this sort of labor has been commonly understood as women's work, it increasingly encompasses both female and male workers in today's formal and informal service and entertainment industries. Hardt and Negri assert that affective labor is a principal form in global economic trends that are tilted toward production of less tangible commodities such as information, designs, communication, companionship, personal well-being, and so on.²¹ Although Hardt and Negri do not directly link affective labor with spectacular accumulation of capital, I contend that hosts' affective labor provides a good case study of the linkage. Hosts' labor functions simultaneously as a creative force of affect, an investment tool for success, and the enactment of the new mode of attachment to a flexible work style, an uncertain, precarious economy, and self-fulfillment of the here-and-now. As I will explain later, their 'self-investments' in their hosting careers and gambling during their 'off hours' feed into their philosophy of spectacular accumulation. Thus, this kind of affective labor has not only become an integral part of the twenty-first century global economy but also serves as a handmaiden to 'spectacular accumulation'.

Affective labor is also a key component of what I call an 'affect economy'. The affect economy in Japan is nested in the service and entertainment industry. This industry exists in a postindustrial socioeconomic milieu that capitalizes on affect – a mode of attachment that can be strategically evoked and directed to translate into something meaningful (such as future-oriented success, investment, vitality, self-fulfillment) – and put up for sale.²² By extension, it creates self-fashioning neoliberal subjects who indulge in a meaningful lifestyle through consumption.²³ The capitalization of affect serves the expansion of spectacular accumulation of capital. The club owner exploits hosts' affective labor to create greater surplus value and make profit out of women's speculative purchasing. The host club exemplifies this affect economy, in which the images and experiences of desirable selves and romantic excitement are transformed into commodity objects for exchange.²⁴ Put differently, hosts' attachment to the neoliberal values – flexible lifestyle, individual freedom, and entrepreneurial creativity – is cultivated through labor. Their attachment also embraces the flip side of the values – little social welfare, performance-based pay, and the burden of providing for oneself. With this attachment they self-motivate to pursue success and upward class mobility; but at the same time, their pursuit feeds the profit-making of the host club and, by extension, the postindustrial national economy. In this way, the affect economy satisfies multiple players and institutions in mutual yet asymmetrical ways.

²⁰See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 108.

²¹Admitting that material labor still comprises a quantitative majority of the world's labor force, however, they contend that qualitatively the world economy is moving toward immaterial labor – commonly known as the information age and new economy. For the global economic trend, see Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*; see also Lazzarato 'Immaterial Labor'.

²²Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.

²³Drawing on Brian Massumi, I define affect as physiological intensity that can be strategically evoked and directed to translate into something meaningful such as self-motivation, romantic excitement, and euphoric sense, but has not yet been, nor will ever be, qualified. For discussion of affect, see Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, and Takeyama, 'The Triumph of Romance'.

²⁴See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Takeyama, 'The Triumph of Romance'.

Hosts are, however, not necessarily duped into their false consciousness about the affect economy. They are aware that club owners are profiting from them, and thus are themselves commodities. They also know that success stories in the host industry are largely myth, since only a few lucky ones ever succeed in achieving their goals. Nonetheless, they ‘voluntarily’ submit to the exploitative nature of their working conditions in order to win the fierce monthly sales competitions. Hosts I interviewed said that they stayed in the hosting business because they wanted to test themselves (*jibun o tamesu*), as if choosing the harder road would assure their greater success. Despite their narratives that stress their freedom of choice, the decisions they make are structurally driven by Japan’s labor market. There are few alternatives in Japan for those who have minimal education and job experience.²⁵ The country’s prolonged economic stagnation, which has been followed by a record high unemployment rate, has further created job insecurity not only among working-class men but also middle-class salarymen. The result has been to force increasing numbers of workers into the affect economy. In one example, Hide, a 33-year-old former salaryman who sold computers, told me that he had been constantly living with the anxiety of being laid off and the pressure of working long hours. ‘With the salaryman job,’ Hide said, ‘the future is bleak. Even if you are lucky to avoid getting laid off and work until retirement, [unlike your parents’ generation] you can still barely afford a house’. He decided to quit his salaryman job and become a host when he saw a TV show about hosts who became overnight millionaires. Hide is not an exception but an example of those who eschew supposedly stable salaryman-type employment to place all bets on the casino-like ‘opportunity’ available in the affect economy. Fantasy’s club manager told me that more ex-salarymen had started working at the club since Japan’s economic situation started worsening in the 1990s. Roughly one-fourth of the hosts at Fantasy are now former salarymen, a high water mark for a club which opened in 1971.

Highly self-motivated hosts take the opportunity to mine for particularly wealthy housewives, company owners, and landlords in hopes of finding gold. They fantasize that if they can just get lucky enough and meet the right woman – i.e., a wealthy woman – they too can get rich and live the life of their dreams. Such wealthy clients, called *futoi kyaku* (‘fat customers’), are relatively rare and everyone in the club knows that. But to hosts, who become attached to their entrepreneurial goals and work excessively long hours to make their own luck despite the evidence, the odds of hitting the jackpot are only one rich customer away. When asked what appealed to them most about hosting, many of the hosts I interviewed mentioned the casino-like nature of the job as a main reason. Hosts rebel against not only the conventional work ethic of salarymen but also the values of frugality and saving for the future. They instead stress the thrill of playful earning and spending for the pleasure of the here-and-now. Indeed, many admitted to gambling their income at baccarat, racetracks, Pachinko parlors, and other betting venues during their ‘off hours’ as well as embracing a career in which they gamble with their bodies. Their gambling in turn becomes another way that the ‘spectacular accumulation’ mindset takes hold in Japan’s affect economy.

Explaining the speculative nature of the hosting business, one host I met at Fantasy admitted that he has been a heavy gambler during his hosting career. He maintained that

²⁵Genda and Hoff, *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*.

luck plays a big part in the hosting business. ‘There’s a lot of cases where in one night you can get really rich or really broke,’ he said. The host recalled the time a customer walked into the club and turned a bottom-ranking host who was struggling into the number one host, spending over 100,000,000 yen (roughly US\$1 million) on him. Three months later, the host quit because the woman had bought him everything he wanted. The host club showcases such successful stories and promotes itself as a land of opportunity for the self-motivated. Top hosts at Fantasy earn the equivalent of more than \$10,000–\$20,000 a month. In their birth months they typically rake in \$30,000–\$50,000 by throwing a special birthday party in the club. Like celebrities, they draw public attention as they brandish their consumption – expensive wristwatches, fashionable brand-named suits, and imported high-end European cars – that they have received from their clients as gifts. ‘Such opportunity,’ this host stressed, ‘is open to any ambitious young male at the host club where the more effort you make, the more money you potentially make’. Thus, the perception of the typical working-class host is that everyone has an equal chance of success in the hosting business. Their interpretation illuminates success under the shadow of equally contingent failure and at the end of a road of necessary hardship. Hosts in turn contribute to valorizing the precariousness of the new millennial capitalism. They also take part in Japan’s labor restructuring that exploits surplus working-class populations under the cover of the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market.²⁶

Indeed, for those who do not own the means of production, commodification of physical, emotional, and sexual labor has been a way of making a living throughout the history of premodern economic exchange and modern capitalism. Nonetheless, I argue that young heterosexual *men’s* self-commodification and pursuit of a speculative style of earning in the name of entrepreneurship magnifies the nexus of postindustrial society and the neoliberal situation in Japan. It serves as a window into the socio-historical changes in idealized values that the nation’s corporate- and family-centered ways of living for stability have undergone in neoliberal reformation within Japan. These values are gradually giving way to a new mode of attachment to, and aspiration toward, future-oriented chance, flexible lifestyles, and self-fulfillment of the here-and-now.²⁷ The individual-centered and speculative socioeconomic milieu discursively shapes an affect economy that capitalizes on the mode of attachment. Such an economy has pried open new possibilities such as hosts for young working-class men, while it simultaneously exploits them and fuels the spectacular accumulation of capital.

Commodified, Yet Entrepreneurial Male Subjects

While the mainstream Japanese media hail successful hosts as the heroes of the new business possibilities, hosts in general are still stigmatized due to their sex-related work and sleazy business practices. This stigma is deeply rooted in Japan’s sex and gender norms. For example, female hostesses are said to enact ‘natural’ sex roles of caring for

²⁶See Kawashima, *The Proletarian Gamble*, 5–6, for further discussion on contingency that functions as the ‘invisible hand’ and precondition of capitalist exploitation in the historical context of 1920–30s imperial Japan.

²⁷Allison, ‘The Cool Brand’, 90.

Japanese men.²⁸ When male hosts play such ‘female roles’, however, they are perceived as ‘unnatural’ and therefore deceptive and sleazy. The editor of the influential monthly magazine *Seiron*, for example, has harshly criticized hosts’ manipulation of ‘vulnerable’ female customers into wanton spending, writing that they are nothing more than ‘lowlifes who prey on women’.²⁹

Hosts themselves acknowledge that their social status lies somewhere between new business opportunity and social stigma, especially for its association with men’s sex-related work. Hosts, as the owner of Fantasy explained to me, historically have been viewed as the ‘male mistress’ (*otoko mekake*), or gigolos who financially depend upon women, until only recently when hosting has gradually gained social acceptance as a business. It is this ambivalence – the host club is socially accepted as a business but not as a sex trade – that hosts constantly rearticulate to better position themselves.

Yoshi, the former number one host in Osaka, admits that hosts are looked down upon and assumed to be at the bottom of the social ladder. On the other hand, he says they wittily deploy the cultural logic of commodity value to turn themselves into potentially desirable beings, thereby inverting Japan’s pyramid-shaped hierarchy:

If we take a look at the flow of money that is directed toward something valuable and desirable in society, hosts’ social position reverses. In Japan, salarymen provide financial support to their wives and family and spend money on their hostesses, and those women spend the money on their hosts. See, the money doesn’t flow back to the salarymen, meaning they are the least desirable in society.

In this reversed social pyramid, hosts come out on top in the interplay between monetary flow, commodity value, and their social desirability. Such a claim gains currency within the postindustrial consumer logic of commodity values and spectacular accumulation of capital: that is, any thing, including a human being, comes to have value as an object only when *it* appeals to the ‘buyer’ and persuades them to realize its value through purchase or investment.³⁰ The postindustrial economy, in which the realm of value-making has shifted from the mode of production to the flexible (and spectacular) accumulation of capital, has rendered commodification of the body/self imaginable and marketable for those who possess little human capital. Using this logic, hosts ‘voluntarily’ commodify themselves. They do so to avoid being commodified by someone else, whether it is a corporate employer or a female financial provider. Thus, *hosts’ self-commodification paradoxically enables them to become their own bosses and entrepreneurial subjects* within the postindustrial consumer logic of commodity value.

Not only postindustrial consumer logic but also neoliberal values rescue hosts from their stigma and inferior status vis-à-vis salarymen, those until recently celebrated as the core of Japan’s post-1945 economic miracle. Many hosts that I spoke with idealized entrepreneurial creativity, freedom, and professionalism. By contrast, they pity the salaryman with their unreasonable working hours, fixed salary, and lack of career

²⁸Allison, *Nightwork*, argues that Japanese hostesses are located in between maternal and sexual figures, both of whom provide different kinds of ‘care’.

²⁹‘Henshūchō kara no messeji’.

³⁰See Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.

mobility. Daisuke, a top-10 host at Fantasy and a former bar owner, juxtaposed hosts' experiences against those of the stereotypical salaryman:

Salarymen in the subway train all look so worn out, don't they? Their unhappiness must come from the routine, working all day long every day under someone else. [In contrast] hosts are blessed with flexibility and freedom. Hosts are more like self-employed entrepreneurs or professional entertainers who simply rent the host club space to do their own business.

In contrast to degraded salarymen, hosts thus highlight their professionalism, vital energy, and the freedom they say they find in the hosting business. Circumventing the limitations built into Japan's salaryman-centric economy, hosts take advantage of their freedom (or insecurity) for an uncertain shot at success in the club. Thus, hosts' self-narrated entrepreneurship makes sense in the context of Japan's neoliberal situation in which politico-economic and popular discourses have increasingly promoted entrepreneurial creativity in contrast to the salaryman-centered corporate and economic model.

The underbelly of the glamorous self-employment and entrepreneurial creativity of the club is, however, a highly competitive work environment and job insecurity. The sales ranking system fosters a ruthless, Darwinian sales battle. The battle produces a handful of winners while the less fortunate are collectively labeled as failures and blamed for their lack of creativity and effort. Lower ranking hosts typically make less than US \$2,000 a month, including tips, which is barely enough to survive on in Tokyo. Those in that position, while they must continually invest in their appearance, stay up-to-date with the latest fashions and carry the latest cell phones, usually cut back on other necessities. They eat *obentō* 'boxed meals' bought at convenience stores only once or twice a day or eat at the club when a client orders food. They spend little money on their daytime clothes, typically wearing only pajamas and sweat pants. Most mid- and lower-level hosts I interviewed share studio-style apartments with other hosts or friends and own little furniture and sometimes not even a television. On top of their material difficulties, some hosts run into physical problems. Their irregular lifestyles, consuming high quantities of alcohol in the club to increase their sales and chain smoking with little sleep or nutritious food, can cause kidney failure and other medical problems. The occupational lifespan of a host is also fairly short due to the survival-of-the-fittest environment, physical and emotional hardship, and youth-oriented entertainment culture. In the host clubs I researched most hosts quit their job in three months or so.

Why don't the veteran hosts resist or withdraw from the exploitative, profit-seeking hosting business? Challenging the club's management essentially risks obstructing their own chances at obtaining the glory and success they dream of. Withdrawal also jeopardizes their legitimacy as socially appropriate male citizens in Japan. Many hosts stress the importance of having a workplace (*shokuba*) to maintaining their autonomy. Ryu, a 32-year-old veteran host who quit hosting after more than 10 years but later came back to work at Fantasy, explains the correlation between workplace and self-autonomy: 'Men who don't have or belong to a workplace and financially depend upon women are called pimps (*himo*), gigolos (*jigoro*), or social losers (*shakaiteki haisha*)'. Ryu differentiates hosts from those socially stigmatized men, and insists that the former have validated themselves as legitimate male citizens. This is because hosts are, he explains, 'professional entertainers and entrepreneurial men who have their own workplace and make their own living'. Noting that it is not an issue for a woman to financially depend upon men in Japan, Ryu says that the norm doesn't apply to men because men are traditionally expected to be

self-sufficient breadwinners. This gendered norm, which has been criticized by feminist scholars for the creation of a gendered division of labor and maintenance of a patriarchal socioeconomic system, underlies the nagging insecurity felt by many hosts. Young men who fear losing their social legitimacy cannot leave and therefore stay in the host club. In this sense, their choice to stay in the hosting business is not an autonomous decision. It is rather embedded in and guided by Japan's gender and class norms.

Some might think that the hosts' self-narrated entrepreneurial identity is entirely false and that they just sell their labor to the capitalist owner. But the host club technically treats hosts as self-employed, that is, contract workers for tax purposes, so as to avoid responsibility for contributing to pensions, health insurance, and other benefits.³¹ This arrangement provides the additional benefit of allowing the club to optimize its profit with few employee expenses. On the other hand, it does provide the necessary imprimatur for hosts' self-employed masculine identities. Thus, hosts 'choose' (or are guided to choose) to become contract workers because of their scant social, economic, and cultural capital. The choice opens up an alternative way of earning a living, but also forecloses on job and welfare security. The host club affords hosts the opportunity to dream of climbing the social ladder within the capitalist market system, but at the same time it entices the hosts into 'voluntarily' subjecting themselves to exploitative working conditions and the expansion of capitalist accumulation in the name of personal 'choice', self-responsibility, and an inevitable gateway to success.

Hosts' commodified-yet-entrepreneurial subjecthood is also embedded in Japan's gender norms where men are the breadwinners and men's well-being is grounded in their occupational success. Despite their beautified appearance and stylized body movements, hosts' masculinity does not vanish; it rather remains in more nuanced ways. Hosts, who are 'feminized' in Western eyes and 'stigmatized' in the Japanese mainstream, wittily highlight their potential masculine prowess in financial gain and occupational success. They also strategically degrade salaryman masculinity to elevate their social status. Thus, their masculinity is relationally constituted and shifts from context to context. Hosts' beautification is neither a zero-sum feminization nor a subordination. It is an ambivalent, if not amplifying, configuration of new masculine subjects who bless the new mode of attachment. Masculinity studies have provided a useful frame to understand this kind of ambiguity and plurality in masculinity. R.W. Connell, a leading sociologist in masculinity studies, has stressed the importance of recognizing more than one kind of masculinity, and writes about 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'marginalized masculinities'. Instead of treating these multiple forms of masculinities as fixed character types, Connell suggests that we should treat multiple masculinities as 'configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships'.³² Hosts' masculinity exemplifies the ambivalent configuration process in Japan's neoliberal situation where the mode of attachment is changing. In this particular situation, men's affective labor becomes a possible vehicle for their 'masculine' pursuit of occupational success. Intimacy here is not a personal matter or exclusively a women's issue. It is about the mode of attachment that individual desires, social values and norms, and global economic trends discursively shape and increasingly capitalize on.

³¹This kind of labor form – contract-based temporary work without benefits – is expanding in Japan's neoliberal situation where labor restructuring has been a central feature. It has been a general trend to replace regular full-time employees with contract workers in order to reduce labor costs and maximize corporate profit.

³²Connell, *Masculinities*, 81.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated how hosts' paradoxical – commodified, yet entrepreneurial – subjectivity is imbricated with postindustrial consumer logic and neoliberal values, as well as with evolving, yet still pervasive gender norms and class hierarchies in contemporary Japan. Hosts' desire for entrepreneurial self-identity and aspirations for upward class mobility indicate a new mode of attachment to neoliberal values of entrepreneurial spirit, flexible lifestyle, and quick financial gain. This mode of attachment – or intimacy – is, I argue, 'for sale' in Japan's affect economy. While hosts' attachment affords them opportunities to dream of achieving their goals in the affect economy, it also drives them to subject themselves to exploitation, both from their employers and from themselves. Hosts are not necessarily duped by the exploitative affect economy in the capitalist market system; even though they are cognizant of the exploitative working conditions, they oftentimes cannot afford to leave due to Japan's socioeconomic environment and gender norms. Trapped in a Catch-22 – aware of their exploitation yet perpetuating it – hosts tirelessly justify their conduct and lifestyle to maintain their vitality and masculine identity.

As such, hosts' enactment as entrepreneurial individuals is much more complex than a simple cause and effect, and cannot be reduced to a mere sample of Japanese cultural essentialism nor to politico-economic determinism. While the appearance of hosts might appeal to Western notions of feminized 'geisha guys', their very capacity to look appealing is a sociocultural artifact of Japan's postindustrialism and the global economic trend of spectacular accumulation. That capacity then becomes a vehicle for maintaining (if not necessarily enhancing) the masculine entrepreneurial identities of hosts and their alternative lifestyles. Hosts' subjectivity is thus constituted via a multi-layered negotiation process in which they cope with their own ambitions, clients' desires, club management, social norms, and socio-economic trends in Japan and the rest of the world. I contend that hosts' paradoxical subjectivity manifests and magnifies a new mode of attachment in Japan's neoliberal situation where multiple interests, values, and ethics compete and are played out. Only discursively is the neoliberal situation configured. Thus, hosts' self-producing neoliberal subjecthood requires an alternative analytical frame as it transcends conventional binaries such as domination and subjugation, the capitalist owner and the wage laborer, and masculinity and femininity.

As I have shown in this article, intimacy in twenty-first century Japan is not merely a personal matter or exclusively a women's issue. Intimacy is an important arena where personal feelings and experience become socially relevant, and political rationality and market values are domesticated through day-to-day experience. Intimacy is thus about a mode of attachment that is closely connected to individual desires, postindustrial consumer logic, neoliberal values, and global economic trends.³³ Rethinking intimacy is the first step toward a critical analysis of its personal, societal, and political use in a neoliberal situation within Japan and beyond. It will require a reorientation of our analytical frame toward a more nuanced understanding of the new

³³Drawing upon Lauren Berlant, I have treated intimacy in this article not just as a personal matter but also as a mode of attachment to certain values, ethics, and practices in a broader sense, including technologies of the self, social norms, and politico-economic conditions. Rethinking intimacy, as Berlant asserts, calls for 'transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography'. Berlant, 'Intimacy,' 6.

mode of attachment, the attachment that is capitalized on at the intersection of Japan's postindustrial society and neoliberal globalization.

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