

Restoring Femininity through Consumption: Female Fans of Male Porn Actors in Japanese *Jôsei-muke* AVs

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at female fans of male porn actors in *Jôsei-muke* Adult Videos (AV) in Japan. The genre of *Jôsei-muke* is a form of pornography aimed at heterosexual women that features good-looking male porn actors; *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. This new genre has emerged in reaction to the decline of mainstream porn studios due to the popularity of porn streaming websites and captures heterosexual women who had been neglected as audiences as a new market. Despite the media attention that the new genre has garnered as a female sexual emancipation, the phenomenon is supported by ‘fans’ of *Eromen* and *Lovemen*.

Based on fieldwork at a series of *Eromen* and *Lovemen* fan events and on online communities as a part of my ongoing doctoral research, I found that the women who self-identified as ‘fans’ of *Eromen* and *Lovemen* carefully designed their personas in the fan community. For instance, they used pseudonyms in order to conceal their public selves at work or home. Simultaneously, it has become apparent that female fans look for intimate interactions with male actors at these events in order to be recognized as feminine and have their confidence restored. The paper draws on conversations with female fans to elucidate the expectations fans have regarding their interactions with *Eromen* and *Lovemen*, and how this fan community influences their everyday lives.

Keywords: Pornography for women, Fan culture, Commodification of recognition, Anthropology of gender, Ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

“Don’t we look like a couple?”, Rina asked while showing me dozens of her instax pictures with her favorite *Eromen*. Rina then carefully put them all in a self-decorated photo book and said, “this is my treasure, full of precious moments!”. The occasion was a fan meeting, organised by the female-targeting (*Jôsei-muke*) porn label SILK LABO. The term *Jôsei-muke* literally means “for women” in Japan and is geared towards thematising female sexual desire (Hambleton 2016). This is in stark contrast to pornography predominantly made for male consumption, which thought to simply be an aid for masturbation. The pornographic industry in Japan, known as Adult Videos (in short, AVs) expanded its clientele to female audiences in the late 2000s to survive the tsunami-like popularity of online streaming porn sites. Note that “women” here signifies exclusively heterosexual women, in the same way that the “mainstream” AVs in Japan are designed for heterosexual men. This is not because Japanese AV industry is exclusively heterosexual overall, but because individual production companies specialize in compartmentalized sexual orientations and fetichisms. The research object here is *Jôsei-muke*, which is a relatively new category in the industry.

One of the main attractions of this genre is that fans can engage with the male actors, called *Eromen* or *Lovemen*, in the “real world”. *Eromen* and *Lovemen* – apart from their main job performing in AVs – regularly appear in fan meeting events, from group-based meetings to private “dates” during which female fans can enjoy temporary intimacy with them. In Japan where it is still stigmatised for women to express their sexual desire, such events function as a safe and comfortable milieu to enjoy their sexuality. Simultaneously, female fans like Rina above, who self-identify as “fan” and spend enormous time and money on their fan activities, look for interactions with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* in order to restore their confidence and femininity at through monetary transactions.

Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition (1995) argues that recognition has to be mutual in order to work socially; however, in this case, the monetary transaction changes the intentions of each actor (female fans / *Eromen* and *Lovemen*). For *Eromen* and *Lovemen*, it is about money and fame. On the other hand, female fans gain recognition even though they have to pay for it. The paper therefore starts with the question of what female fans expectations from such commodified recognition are and what their motivation to engage in such fan activities is. This paper is based on ethnographic research that took place from 2018 to 2019 as a part of my on-going doctoral research. All informants are pseudonymized for privacy reasons.

JÔSEI-MUKE ADULT VIDEOS

The genre of *Jôsei-muke* AVs has emerged from the current climate of decline in the mainstream AV industry due to the popularity of online porn streaming sites (Hambleton 2016). In 2008, Soft on Demand (in short for SOD) launched a new production line, SILK LABO, that targeted heterosexual female audience in order to expand their business. This new project started with women’s complains about mainstream AV videos and suggestions for a new genre of romantic, narrative-based porn that featured male idol lookalikes instead of overly macho men. By collaboration with women’s weekly magazine *an•an*, SILK LABO has gained a lot of popularity as well as media attention due to the mantra ‘it is porn for women by women’ (Kigawa 2016). The assumption, however, that women do not watch porn in general and need to be enticed by a specific soft version of pornography conveys a strong gender double standard. Such concerns were voiced by female producers of SILK LABO during my interview. They repeatedly insisted that it is just about labelling of their own products in order not to confuse clientele who are searching what they want for nighttime entertainment. Later in 2013, SOD launched GIRL’S CH that was initially made up from female friendly selections of cuts from pre-existing pornography in SOD. Soon, GIRL’S CH saw one million users access the website every month. In the last couple of years, GIRLS’ CH started their own production line for female customers who sought to watch hard core versions of SILK LABO for instance, depictions of men being submissive or featuring ‘amateur’ boys for more realistic scenes. Linda Williams (1989) has early on argued the importance of inclusivity and visibility of female voices in the industry; despite the ambivalence if the term, I would maintain that the significance of *Jôsei-muke* is that it serves multiple female voices in the industry.

EROMEN AND LOVEMEN

Despite of its significance in terms of gender politics, the crucial innovation of *Jôsei-muke* AVs is a cult-like fandom surrounding its male porn actors, *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. While the word *Eromen* is a combination of ‘erotic’ and ‘men’, *Lovemen* is a contraction of ‘love’ and ‘men’. Contrary to the hypermasculine figures in AVs for men, *Eromen* and *Lovemen* are required to ‘maintain a non-threatening, sexually innocent image inspired by the aesthetics of Japanese pop idols’ and have an ‘approachable “everyman” aesthetic that is central to Japan’s boy-band industry’ (Hambleton 2016:432). In addition to that, they should be handsome and able to act in front of the camera, which is particularly important because *Jôsei-muke* AVs contain much dramatic dialogue. The only difference between *Eromen* and *Lovemen* is that the former belongs to SILK LABO, the latter to GIRLS’ CH; however, some male actors perform for both studios and may therefore be both *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. Their job is to perform in *Jôsei-muke* AVs but also to appear in series of fan meeting events where fans can interact with them by shaking their hands, taking photographs or hugging them. This fan service includes, for instance, instax photos with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* that costs 2000 JPY per photo. In

addition to events that are organized by SOD, each *Eromen* and *Lovemen* conducts their own fan meeting events, sometimes privately or with smaller groups. Some *Eromen* and *Lovemen* also work as male escorts (15,000 JPY for 90 minutes at the cheapest). The degrees of intimacy female fans gain through the interaction with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* varies from shaking hands to sex without penile-genital penetration (the selling of the latter is illegal by law). *Eromen* and *Lovemen* embody a deliberately produced fantasy that conveys every day, boy-next-to-door aesthetics, which many of the staged pop idols have these days. However, their accessibility— even for the most intimate scene — makes *Eromen* and *Lovemen* so alluring that female fans can interact with them on a pay-as-you-go basis. The more you pay the more interactions with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* you gain. I argue thus that the system of *Eromen* and *Lovemen* stands in between host clubs (see Takeyama 2010,2016) and pop idols (see Galbraith and Karlin 2012) in Japan. In this context, the research question has evolved into what female fans' expectations from *Eromen* and *Lovemen* are. What influence do *Eromen* and *Lovemen* have on female fans' everyday lives?

FANS' IDENTITY IN VIRTUALITY

"Female fans of *Eromen* and *Lovemen*... I think they are relatively financially affluent women who do not have particular hobbies. For them, coming to SOD events is a hobby. They do not have particular tastes in music, film, or anything. They are quite normal, average Japanese women", said a female assistant producer of *Jōsei-muke* AVs during our interview. She continued, "Our main clients are diverse, from the 20s to 40s, sometimes 60s. When we started in 2008, it was mainly women in the 30s and 40s who were not familiar with pornographic materials or any sex-related culture. But now we have young women in the 20s and they know a lot about sex, like squirting (female ejaculation)! In my generation (the late 30s), it was a taboo and considered shameful as we thought it was urine coming out of the vagina". The way she described female clientele of *Jōsei-muke* AVs suggested that this female sexual emancipation has evolved over generations. At the same time, the emphasis on 'average Japanese women who do not have particular hobbies but coming to SOD events' implies the enthusiasm of female fans.

After many hours of participant observation at *Eromen* and *Lovemen* events, I have discovered that female fans use pseudonymous, or nicknames, when interacting with each other. These names often are associated with their Twitter accounts, which female fans use for receiving and sharing information about *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. Their Twitter accounts are purposefully designed for their fan activities and contains no other information about their private matters (for instance, jobs and family). Such online personas reminded me of Washida Kiyokazu's theory of *Kao* (face): one's identity is not fixed or static, but only appears in a dialogue with others (1998), it emerges only when it is seen or socially recognized by others. In other words, one's social identity varies according to different social settings and the social others present in this setting. The nature of Twitter as an online space for connecting people with the same interests plays a significant role here. This is mostly because of the sociocultural dynamic that undergirds the gendered double standard that women are not supposed to express their sexual desire in Japan. One of my interlocutors, a fan of *Eromen* and *Lovemen* herself told me; "This place (fan event) and people here gives me an ease of talking about my sexuality, which is very difficult in my everyday life". The pseudonymous social setting functions as a sanctuary for those female fans to speak about their sexual desire without revealing their other social personas at work or in a family. This suggests that fans not only develop a certain attachment to their favorite *Eromen* and *Lovemen*, but also to the community as a whole — a point that has also been observed in other female fan communities such as the Takarazuka theatre troupe (Robertson 1998). I therefore argue that fans' identity lies in its *virtuality* (Kapferer 2004), that is, in a secluded liminal space which eliminates preexisting social norms, rules, and discourses by artificially creating a unique social setting. This liminal space does not exist independently from so-called "reality", rather it exists alongside of it and there is some mutual influence. In line with the comments of a female assistant producer of *Jōsei-muke* AVs above, the sexual emancipation of those who engage in the fandom of *Jōsei-muke* AVs appears to be evolving in a different social setting from their everyday lives. SOD's organized events provide female fans with a safe milieu to express their sexual desire; however, it has to be emphasized that

access to those events and interaction with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* comes with a price tag. In other words, female sexual emancipation here is only actualized through consumption. In what follows, I examine comments that have been collected during my field work, in order to analyze the expectations that female fans have of *Eromen* and *Lovemen*.

FEELING LIKE A NATURAL WOMAN

"I am an *obasan* (a Japanese term for a middle-aged woman) who has already retired from romantic relationship life. Coming to *Eromen* (and *Lovemen*) events and chatting with them makes me feel fresh, like the young girl I used to be. It is a nice little treat for me", said Mari who later I found out is married with two children. The term *obasan* describes a middle-aged woman, with connotations of 'mature', 'married' and/or 'sexually unattractive'. Despite the unflattering nature of the term, the fact of her self-identification as *obasan* signifies her desire of restoring a sense of femininity through interactions with *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. Akiko Takeyama (2016), in her analysis of host clubs, analyzed the importance of male attention for female clients: "If *obasan* is a culturally constructed object that pressures women to fight aging or avoid it, there is no escape from *onna no shōmikigen* (expiration date of womanliness) –a metaphorical reminder that their biological clock is ticking (..) The idea of 'best by' is applied to womanliness in everyday conversation as if women themselves were consumable objects and *obasan* were fated to be dumped like garbage" (2016:13). In other words, womanliness in this context is strictly tied up with desirability from men.

An employee of SOD once told me: "female fans imagine themselves as *Eromen* or *Lovemen*'s girlfriends". Contrary to female AV actors' events, where male fans unite to support their idols in a homosocial setting, female fans compete with each other for the amount of time they spend with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* and how much financial commitment they have made for their *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. The gendered difference among female and male fans partly occurs because physical contact is prohibited at female AV actors' events, a rule that does not apply to *Eromen* events. This rivalry among fans cannot be understood as competition for winning love of *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. As a business, *Eromen* and *Lovemen* are supposed to treat fans equally. Rather, the aim of this is for female fans to achieve self-realization as woman.

"I feel so good when my favorite (*Eromen* and *Lovemen*) does well", Rina in her early 20s stated. Rina works as an office clerk during day time and also as a female escort at night. Her monthly salary is 500,000 JPY which is more than double the average salary of a Japanese office clerk at her age. Rina spends most of her income for "supporting" her favorite *Eromen* and *Lovemen*. Supporting activity, or *oshi-katsu* 押し活 (*oshi* signifies an object of support while *katsu* is an activity) is a popular Japanese term to signify an act of support or to cherish on someone or something that one really likes. *Oshi-katsu* is often viewed positively because it provides mental welfare for those who engage (NHK news January 18th 2022); however, such activities heavily depend on the financial capacities of those who do the supporting. As Rina's comment above suggests, *oshi-katsu* puts emotional commitments in the market system in order for supporters to gain recognition.

Here, a more thorough theorization of recognition is required. The theory of recognition is discussed by two of the most significant contemporary philosophers, Axel Honneth (1995) and Charles Taylor (1994). Both emphasize the importance of recognition as a condition for a fully achieved subjectivity, as social life is intersubjective. Taylor asserted that recognition 'is a vital human need' (1994:26) and misrecognition 'can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred' (ibid). Similarly, Honneth maintained that social struggle is experienced through 'disrespect', that is, when one is being denied the conditions of self-formation. While they emphasise the importance of everyday dialogue with "the significant other", we also have to take into account the performativity of others, especially in the context of *oshi-katsu* where idols such as *Eromen* and *Lovemen* take a staged position in a particular social discourse. *Eromen* and *Lovemen* perform sexy boy-next-to-door/boyfriend figures which convey the fantasy of providing women with a complete sexual attention. This means that unlike in the case of Honneth and Taylor who conceive of recognition as a macro-phenomenon that pervades society, performative recognition is happening along a power

differential, and not as reciprocal phenomenon. The exchange of recognition between fans and *Eromen* and *Lovemen* appears reciprocal, but their motivation of giving and receiving recognition is different. For fans, it is to enjoy their fantasy and to fulfil the dream of self-realization, while for *Eromen* and *Lovemen* it is about earning money and fame.

COMMODIFICATION OF RECOGNITION

“The interaction with *oshi* for me is a means to feel relaxed, which eliminates my daily stress. In order to support *oshi*, I can survive hard work. The more I support *oshi*, the more confidence and motivation for life I receive from them”, said Miki who works as a hospital nurse. Miki’s comment as well as the others above suggest that female fans are not only sexually objectifying *Eromen* and *Lovemen*; rather they enjoy the feeling of being appreciated for financial support. Such commodification of intimacy- or recognition- has been widely discussed in the field of anthropology.

Nicole Constable’s review (2009) discussed the increasing anthropological interest in the commodification of intimacy in relation to interconnectivity of global and local economy, with reference to cross-border marriages, migrant domestic labors, and sex workers. Drawing on Karl Marx’s definition of commodification, Constable defines it as “the way in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought and sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized; or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flows of goods” (2008:50). The term intimacy, in Constable’s definition, is “social relationships that are – or give the impression of being – physically and/or emotionally close, personal, sexually intimate, private, caring, or loving” (ibid). Considering these two different terms integrated together, the term commodification of intimacy accommodates the idea of a social relationship that is assigned value and price and that is available on the market. To put it differently, within the market in which intimacy is commodified, social relationships are built on monetary transactions.

Takeyama, who elaborates on Constable’s review, understands the affective economy to utilize one’s capacities, for instance appearance, to “seduce one another in order to satisfy themselves” (2016:173). In Takeyama’s analysis of host clubs, she argues that male hosts commodify themselves and by doing so they aim to succeed financially, which allows them class mobility and presents a challenge to the conventional masculine archetypes of salarymen. To accomplish their dream of financial success, hosts maximize their means of seduction to meet female clients’ needs for romantic excitement. According to Takeyama, affect is a bodily capacity to fantasize or fetishize a better future which is also multidimensionally relational and central to subjective formation. In sum, it could be argued that social relationships that are built upon such affective economic transaction are not an illusion, but remain only sustainable with financial commitment.

Commodified intimacy, despite of its uncertain nature, is at the center of subject formation as Takeyama argued. In the milieu of host clubs, intimacy becomes a currency for subject formation, hence it is what is bought and exchanged there. I argue, however, that recognition is more relevant to capture the sociocultural dynamics of *oshi-katsu*. As discussed above, female fans of *Eromen* and *Lovemen* are not attempting to win the love of their *oshi* – although opportunities of meeting *Eromen* and *Lovemen* can be highly intimate – rather they seek for self-realization as women by supporting *oshi*. Such an economic system is rational if one only seeks for recognition, not for a relationship that often require commitments and compromises and harbors the risk of rejection. This is the reason why some fans rarely leave the *virtuality* of the commodified recognition as they find confidence and motivation for life through *oshi-katsu*. It could perhaps be argued that it is an unconscious challenge of those women to the still dominant gendered idea of a romantic relationship leading to marriage, which requires a different kind of exchange of values: youth on the side of the women is exchanged with the financial capacity and the ability to take care of a household. However, the question whether recognition, which is “a vital human need” (Taylor, 1994:26), should be commodified or not has to be discussed from a perspective of ethics. If everything became consumable, the world would be divided between those who are affluent and those who are not. At the same time, such commodification of

recognition – in other words, social relationships – perhaps could change the value or meaning of human activity. Those are the main questions in need of further discussion.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on female fans of Japanese *josei-muke* AVs, this paper has shown how recognition is commodified in *oshi-katsu*. By having multiple opportunities to interact with *Eromen* and *Lovemen* in a safe and comfortable *virtuality*, each fan developed a certain intimacy and sense of attachment - not only to *Eromen* and *Lovemen* – but to the fan community itself. Thus, the fan community, developed by SOD, provides a positive mode of fantasy production where women can depart from everyday routine and feel at ease. *Eromen* and *Lovemen's* interactions with, and attention paid to the female fans furthermore validate fan's self-recognition, a desire that often is difficult to achieve in "reality" due to the fear of rejection. While commodification of recognition frees women from undertaking unpaid emotional labor often required in "free love" relationships, it also embeds their emotional and physical satisfaction within a potentially exploitative economic system.

My hope is that my ethnographic work will contribute to our understanding of commodified recognition in Japan more broadly, including other forms of *oshi-katsu*. Especially in the time of Covid-19 crisis, *oshi-katsu* gained popular attention as a means of self-fulfillment and in order to escape from harshness of everyday lives, loneliness and a general lack of communication. The problem of (or the lack of) recognition is a central key to explaining structural elements including gender inequality and sexuality within wider Japanese society. This leaves much scope for future discussions.

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