

# **Commodified Romance in A Tokyo Host Club**

by

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## **Introduction**

My original paper title was “Queer Eyes For the Japanese Guy” but I changed it to “Commodified Romance in a Tokyo Host Club.” Based on 10 months of fieldwork in Tokyo host and hostess clubs that I’m currently doing for my doctoral dissertation, today I would like to talk a little bit about male hosts and their female clients, what kind of social context the female clients’ desires derive from, and finally what the host club phenomena means to the gender and heterosexual norms in Japan. Ultimately, I intend to demonstrate some aspects of how the Japanese host club simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes prevailing gender norms, and by extension heterosexual norms in Japan.

## **Background of Host Clubs**

First, I am going to explain a little bit about what a host club is and who are the so-called hosts and their clients. First of all, host clubs are not new. The first host club opened in Tokyo in 1966, but it mainly targeted upper-class matrons, wives of company executives, wealthy widows and so forth. Back then the host club business was very exclusive and largely invisible to the public. However, in the last five years, host clubs have drawn a lot of media attention and become familiar to mainstream Japanese. The numbers of the clubs are also rapidly increasing particularly in big cities like Tokyo, Yokohama, and Osaka. An estimated 200 clubs and over

5,000 hosts are working in the Kabuki-cho entertainment district, which is located in Shinjuku, Tokyo. This is where I'm doing most of my research.

Basically, host clubs are the flip side of hostess clubs: Instead of women entertaining men, men "host" women, offering them "professional companionship", and, as I will explain later, other options as well. The hosts themselves can be divided into two groups. (1) Those who have minimal education and cannot find a white-collar job; and (2) hosts who previously worked as salarymen but got into the hosting business mainly because they saw hosting as an opportunity to make a lot of money. Regardless of which group they belong to, they dream of meeting a rich woman at the club who will willingly spend huge sums of money on them.

In order to attract women, hosts project a seductive masculine image—slim bodies, salon-tanned skin, trendy hairstyles and expensive brand suits and accessories, etc. They are trained to provide highly stylized forms of service. If a woman reaches for a cigarette, for example, a host will typically whip out his lighter very smoothly before she has time to put it in her mouth. If a customer goes to the ladies room, a host will patiently wait outside, ready to hand her a steaming hand towel when she exits. Every effort is made to construct a fantasy world in which women will willingly spend money to satisfy their desires.

The majority of clients at a host club I'll call *Fantasy*,<sup>1</sup> the club in Kubuki-cho where I've been doing the majority of my research, are housewives in their 30s and 40s. Most of these women go to host clubs to escape from daily stress and have fun. They often say to me that their husbands show a lack of interest in their appearance and/or body, and that they feel as if their feminine attractiveness has been lost. Their hosts, on the other hand, pay close attention to even small changes in their appearance such as a hairstyle change or different color of eyeshadow, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> All names here are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the club, hosts, and their clients.

Hosts will say, “Did you cut your front hair? It looks good on you.” The housewives say that they can recover their feminine attractiveness and self-assurance by being called by their first names, treated as attractive women, and approached as potential girlfriends in host clubs.

They also enjoy an alternative form of intimacy fostered through the game of romance. Once these women fall in love with hosts for fun or for real, they come back to the host club repeatedly and spend money on their hosts. Thus, women’s romantic aspirations coupled with the commodified romance offered by hosts support the host club industry.

Commodified romance is a term that I came up with to describe a romance in which clients pay to create their own love story. The more money and time they devote to developing the “story,” the line between real and pseudo romance is blurred. Indeed, many women devote great sums of money and time with their hosts to make the commodified romance real in their “real” life. For example, I met a woman in her middle 30s named Akemi, who spent over 100 million yen (nearly one million U.S. dollars) on her favorite host over eight years. I will talk a little bit more about her later, but basically Akemi started to believe that her host was more than just a paid performer but her actual boyfriend. Akemi’s case is typical, I’ve found, for clients who maintain long-term relationships with their hosts.

By placing the notion of commodified romance against the backdrop of changing, yet pervasive gender asymmetry in contemporary Japan, I intend to demonstrate some of the aspects how the host club trend simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes prevailing gender norms, and by extension heterosexual norms in Japan.

### **Desires and Social Contexts**

What I have found so far is: Despite the symbolic subordination of hosts, observed in their subservient manner and eagerness to please women, gender relations at *Fantasy* are not a simple reversal of that found in Japanese society. This is because according to hosts, once women fall in love with hosts, they tend to willingly devote themselves to the hosts so as to be better thought of. In order to please their hosts, women spend money on them and also give expensive gifts such as cars, watches, and brand suits.

Female clients, who oftentimes want to believe that the commodified romance they foster with their hosts is for real, tend to internalize prevailing social beliefs about love. One such belief is that one should selflessly assist the one you love when he is in difficulty and need of support. Internalizing the value, one might be able to assure one's sense of love toward him only when one is selflessly devoting. Akemi, the woman who spent nearly 100 million yen on her host, is a good example of this. She helped her host achieve and maintain "top ranking" status because she knew that was his goal. In order to keep supporting her host, who was in the middle of a sales battle, Akemi became a sex worker. Nonetheless, when her money ran out, the relationship ended. She still lives in an apartment house and works in the sex industry. She told me, "Although I spent so much money on him, he never asked me to do so. I voluntarily did it. I did it in order to satisfy mainly myself. The harder things got, the more love I felt for him and the more strength I felt within myself."

Self-devotion as a means to express and affirm love is highly gendered. Nonetheless, as Akemi exemplifies, romance veils gender asymmetry and depoliticizes women's choices for self-devotion. Thus, the host club environment creates a consumer space for women, in which like Japanese men, women can pursue their romantic and sexual aspirations and create their own love

story. However, the environment is also very much embedded in the overall gender hierarchy of heteronormative Japanese society.

This is because desire, which derives from dissatisfaction with everyday life, is always coupled to the existing social context. In this sense, as Foucault reminds us, “Where there is desire, the power relation is already present” and therefore, total transgression is impossible” (Foucault 1978: 81). Nevertheless, Foucault adds, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1978: 95). Since power is not out there to be seized but emerges as it is exercised and negotiated from innumerable points, subversion is possible only *from within the power dynamics* (Foucault 1978: 93-5; see also Butler 1990: 31; Kondo 1997: 152). I emphasize here “subversion is possible only from within the power dynamics,” and argue that subversion of hegemonic heteronormativity is not possible without denaturalizing and destabilizing the current heterosexual practices.

### **None-penetrative Sex**

One potential subversion in the host club culture, I think, lies in non-penetrative sex between hosts and their clients. The conventional notion of sex in Japan, as in many other cultures, assumes that sex is something that is “done” by men to women. (Allison 1996: 62; Segal 1994: 266). In Japanese, for example, the phrase “*saigomade iku*” (meaning to “carry on till the end”) indicates penetration and by extension ejaculation. Everything else is considered peripheral, or *zengi* (foreplay).<sup>2</sup> The phrase indicates a male perspective since the “end point” is male and not female orgasm. In short, sex is always already understood from the male point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> In the sex trade, “*honban*” (the real thing) refers to penetration.

Although the majority of hosts have had penetrative sex with some clients, I want to highlight the occurrence of non-penetrative sex as an alternative form of heterosexual practice that takes place in the host club culture. Akemi, for example, admits that her ex-host often slept with her without sexual intercourse taking place. She explains that hosts are often drunk or exhausted after work. As a result, they have no energy for sex or have erectile difficulties. Akemi, however, says, “Because I really loved him, I was very happy just to be in his arms, being kissed and cuddled.” When I asked her if she was sexually satisfied, Akemi answered, “What really matters is not sexual techniques or size of the penis but the affectionate heart and passionate feeling.”

Miki, a 31-year-old divorced mother with two sons who has been involved in a three-year romance with a host, also emphasizes her feeling, or *kimochi*. She explains that her marriage became sexless because of her ex-husband's inconsiderate attitude toward her. She says that “[In contrast], my host is a good listener and advisor on personal matters, making me feel that he will always be there for me. This *kimochi* (heart and feeling) is more important than mere physical relations for me. Because of the *kimochi*, even just being touched on the shoulder or kissed on the cheek is very special to me.”

Female clients like Akemi and Miki reinforce the social assumption that unlike men, women cannot have sex without love. They might also simply put a gloss on their hosts' sexual disinterest. Indeed, hosts say that, ideally, they want to make money without having "actual" sex, which takes up their time and energy. In this respect, hosts might be seen as taking advantage of women's feelings. However, in the end, the hosting business does rely upon satisfying female customers. In this respect, romance without penetrative sex is a result of the negotiation between some female clients and their hosts. Female clients like Akemi and Miki in turn subsume

physical and mental pleasure under the more communicative and negotiable form of erotic contact rather than physical connection and genital pleasure.

Non-penetrative sex also challenges the gendered understanding of heterosexuality — the phallogentric assumption that sex is something "done" by men to women (Allison 1996: 92). The multiple heterosexualities, which are enacted in the host club environment, may not overthrow the wider sex and gender system itself. Nevertheless, the non-penetrative sex in host club culture does contest the “good,” “normal,” and “natural” sexuality, normally defined as “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial” (Rubin 1984: 280).

In addition, host clubs also challenge the social assumption that women’s passivity in sexual matters has limited their participation in Japan’s mainstream sex industry. Judith Butler has theorized that gender is a shared understanding and an “object” to be achieved rather than a result of biological sex (Butler 1990, 25). I also argue that the assumption of women’s sexual passivity is a culturally constructed and shared understanding. The host club phenomenon debunks the whole notion that women are sexually passive, suggesting that their passivity is really the result of a lack of *means* to create such a social space.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, based on what I have researched so far, I situate the host club phenomena as both a part of the larger Japanese social context as well as a site where subversion is possible from within Japan’s late-capitalism. Indeed I am aware of the aspect that such subversion through consumption is easily incorporated into neo-liberal ideology, in which a good citizen is defined as a good consumer and a depoliticized individual under the rubric of personal choice and responsibility. Nonetheless, I also think it is important to pay close attention to the sporadic

violation of social assumptions, such as sex that is non-penetrative, that transforms gender characteristics and sexual relations, impacting on the existing heteronormative gender system.

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