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Mediating Me: Digital Sociality and Smartphone Culture in Contemporary Japan

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MEDIATING ME:
DIGITAL SOCIALITY AND SMARTPHONE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Kimberly Hassel

A DISSERTATION
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OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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MEDIATING ME:
DIGITAL SOCIALITY AND SMARTPHONE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Abstract

Mediating Me: Digital Sociality and Smartphone Culture in Contemporary Japan examines the relationships between Social Networking Services (SNS), smartphones, and shifting notions of sociality and selfhood in contemporary Japan, especially among youths. This dissertation is situated within Japan's historical status as a pioneer in mobile communication during the 1990s, the rise in SNS usage following the Triple Disaster of March 11th, 2011, the start of the Reiwa era, and the heightened digital mediation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid evolution of mobile communication and digital technologies vis-à-vis ongoing shifts in Japanese society motivates the research question that drives this dissertation: How can the digital serve as a lens in observing change *and* continuity in Japan, especially with regards to gender and identity?

This dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted in Japan between August 2019 and August 2020, and remotely between August 2020 and October 2021. Through an integration of interview data, media analysis, and ethnographic vignettes called “Mediations,” this dissertation elucidates how perceived norms and moral standards centering on the embeddedness of the digital in everyday life are constantly (re)negotiated. Each chapter explores how digital platforms are used and imagined in different ways by different users, ranging from schoolgirls to Black Japanese youth activists. As each chapter demonstrates, the uses and imaginations of smartphone ownership and SNS usage are contingent on various factors, including but not limited to life stage and crisis. As a contribution to the burgeoning field of digital anthropology, this dissertation also highlights the indispensability of digital ethnography in an increasingly digitally mediated society—both prior to and during pandemic times. Although centering on Japan, this ethnography of smartphone and SNS usage contributes to broader understandings of digital sociality, digital embeddedness, transnational digital networks, and digital ethnographic methods.

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Introduction

Keitai Studies in the Smartphone Age:

Digital Ethnographic Possibilities

It is evening, and I am sitting on the Chūō-Sōbu Line bound to Nakano. I had spent the day visiting an interlocutor, Nanao, at her home. The train passes by Ryogoku, and I see the towering specter of Tokyo Skytree, its lights pulsating through the nighttime sky. As this is my favorite view on the Chūō-Sōbu Line, I make sure to look out the window each time, whenever I can. My eyes fall upon a woman sitting in front of the window that offered my view of Skytree. She is looking down at her smartphone, like most of the people currently on the train—myself included, prior to redirecting my focus to the window. My eyes dart around the train, which is relatively empty due to the late hour. I then redirect my focus to my smartphone.

The train pulls into Ochanomizu Station. I survey the train car once again. The woman in front of the window is still looking down at her phone. However, all of a sudden she looks up, double-takes, and jumps from her seat. She dashes off the train, holding her bag close to her. Although she was wearing a mask, the playful glint in her eyes suggested that she was smiling at this close call. I found myself smiling, too, as I empathized with this experience of deep immersion. This experience may also resonate with others, especially given my frequent observations of commuters, pedestrians, and café-goers engaging in this deep immersion.

The motif of the smartphone user is one that is frequently narrated with a tinge of peril. The train stations and subways of Tokyo are a testament to this, as signs and electronic tickers warn commuters to refrain from using smartphones while walking in order to avoid falling onto the train tracks. By introducing this motif of the smartphone user, one in which the device is raised and the head is lowered, I do not intend to pathologize or villainize smartphone usage and users. On the contrary, I use this motif as a way to highlight the critical, curious, and sometimes playful interrogations that drive my research. The motif of the smartphone user seems to

privilege the device as having a sort of hypnotic impact, depriving the user of agency—and manners. I wish to center the user. I am interested in *who* these users are, *what* drives deep digital immersion, *where* and *when* these moments of immersion take place, *why* these users fixate their eyes upon the glowing screens of their smartphones, and *how* these screens sometimes invoke smiles or grimaces. I am intrigued by the multiple social worlds that exist within this hardware—namely, software in the form of Social Networking Services (SNS).¹ I am interested in the various entanglements that characterize smartphone and SNS usage, from the sensory (such as gaze and touch) to the social (such as the exchange of “likes” and messaging). Most importantly, I am drawn to the ways in which these technologies are narrated and conceptualized by a variety of actors, from the mass media to the users themselves.

This dissertation examines the relationships between Social Networking Services (SNS), smartphones, and shifting notions of sociality and selfhood in contemporary Japan, especially among youths. This dissertation is situated within Japan’s historical status as a pioneer in mobile communication during the 1990s, the rise in SNS usage following the Triple Disaster of March 11th, 2011, the start of the Reiwa era, and the heightened digital mediation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid evolution of mobile communication and digital technologies vis-à-vis ongoing shifts in Japanese society motivates the research question that drives this dissertation: How can the digital serve as a lens in observing change *and* continuity in Japan, especially with regards to gender and identity?

¹ Social Networking Services is the localized term for social media. Within its 2018 White Paper on Information and Communications in Japan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications defines SNS as services—such as Facebook, Twitter, and LINE—that build users’ social networks or relationships through online interactions (158).



Figure 0.1: Posters scattered in various train stations/subways in Tokyo, depicting the dangers of walking while using smartphones (*aruki sumaho*). Photographs taken by the author.

This dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted in Japan between August 2019 and August 2020, and remotely between August 2020 and October 2021. Through an integration of interview data, media analysis, and ethnographic vignettes called “Mediations,” this dissertation elucidates how perceived norms and moral standards centering on the embeddedness of the digital in everyday life are constantly (re)negotiated. Each chapter explores how digital platforms are used and imagined in different ways by different users, ranging from schoolgirls to Black Japanese youth activists. As each chapter demonstrates, the uses and imaginations of smartphone ownership and SNS usage are contingent on various factors, including but not limited to life stage and crisis. As a contribution to the burgeoning field of digital anthropology, this dissertation also highlights the indispensability of digital ethnography in an increasingly digitally

mediated society—both prior to and during pandemic times. Although centering on Japan, this ethnography of smartphone and SNS usage contributes to broader understandings of digital sociality, digital embeddedness, transnational digital networks, and digital ethnographic methods.

***Keitai* Studies: A Genealogy**

My research on SNS and smartphones in contemporary Japan has been largely driven by two major factors: the strong genealogy of *keitai* (mobile phone) studies in Japan, and my enduring research focus on Japanese youth culture. In the introduction of *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, the groundbreaking edited volume on mobile phones in Japan, Mizuko Itō characterizes the *keitai* as a sociocultural object, a “snug and intimate technosocial tethering, a personal device supporting communications that are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life” (Itō 2005, 1). This characterization is partially attributed to the translation of *keitai* (携帯), “something you carry with you” (1). However, it is also attributed to the “socio-technical practices of using and engaging with information technologies in an ongoing, lightweight, and pervasive way” (13). What has been particularly noteworthy of the *keitai* in a historical context is its offering of mobile Internet since the 1990s. Japan has been the forefront of mobile Internet technology, beginning with the introduction of the i-mode mobile Internet service in 1999 by NTT DoCoMo, one of Japan’s most prominent mobile retailers (Itō 2005, 1; Steinberg 2019, 127-162). The offering of mobile Internet in Japan in the 1990s is a stark contrast to Internet offerings in locations such as the United States, which centered on personal computers (Itō 2005, 1-8). The centrality of mobile Internet in Japanese mobile phones led to the creation of the term *garakei*. This term combines “Galapagos” and *keitai* to hint at this technological assemblage—a flip phone with a built-in camera and mobile Internet—that emerged in Japan. The emergence of *garakei* created a robust domestic market for telecommunications that marked it unnecessary for Japan to expand its

enterprises abroad or integrate outside providers (Galbraith and Karlin 2016, 14-15; Kushida 2011; Kushida 2012).

Scholars in *keitai* studies have examined the spectrum of practices and (sub)cultures that emerged in the 1990s and onwards. The use of *emoji* and *kaomaji* to express emotion in mediated communication was a feature of *keitai* culture—and has continued in the smartphone age. The now “universal” *emoji* (絵文字, literally “picture characters”) originated as pictorial characters developed by Kurita Shigetaka for NTT DoCoMo’s i-mode (Giannoulis and Wilde 2020, 3-4).² *Kaomaji* (顔文字, literally “face characters”) appeared in the 1980s, yet were also an integral component of communication mediated by *keitai* (Matsuda 2020, 198). *Keitai* would also constitute a symbol of youth culture in Japan. Scholars have noted the interesting transition that took place in the 1990s of pagers (such as the PocketBell) and *keitai* as devices used primarily by *sararīman* (“salarymen”) for business to devices “appropriated” by youth for sociality and personalization (Hjorth 2009; Matsuda 2005; Okada 2005). As Itō explains, *keitai* would become seamlessly embedded into the social experiences of youth users:

The mostly young natives of the *keitai*-pervaded world experience social presence through pulsating movement between foreground and background awareness rather than through clearly demarcated acts of “logging in” or “showing up” to a sociotechnical space. This is a view of the mobile universe that sees remote and networked relations as a pervasive and persistent fixture of everyday life rather than something that is specifically invoked through intentional acts like making a phone call or powering up a networked PC. (Itō 2005, 15)

The emergence of cell phone novels in 2007, which were predominantly written by young women in transit, would serve as a testament to this embeddedness (Lukács 2013). The pervasive use of *keitai* among young people would create a moral panic regarding a decline in “manners” among youths and the growing “superficial” nature of their (mediated) relationships (Matsuda 2005).

² While *emoji* are now used universally, Abel (2020) issues the reminder that *emoji* are “strongly embedded in cultural conditions” (34). Context must be considered when deciphering the meaning of *emoji*.



Figure 0.2: *Keitai* enshrined behind glass in the NTT DoCoMo museum. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 0.3: Models of the PocketBell (left) and i-mode *garakei* (right) on display at the NTT DoCoMo museum. Photograph taken by the author.

How do the dynamics attributed to *keitai* and youth culture resonate with *sumaho* (smartphones), which is next in line in the genealogy of mobile phone studies in Japan? A representative at the NTT DoCoMo Museum in Ryōgoku, Tokyo informed me that *garakei*, 3G services, and i-mode are set to be discontinued in 2026, coinciding with the development of 5G. *Garakei* will thus become a historical artifact, although will be reborn as a “smarter” device—the *garaho*, a smartphone that can flip shut. A study of mobile phones in Japan beginning with Reiwa necessitates a focus on smartphones, the current dominant mobile phone prototype.

The affordances of smartphones vis-à-vis the affordances of *keitai* constitute an entry point of analysis. Affordances are often discussed in the context of function. Davis (2020) explains that affordances, in succinct terms, “refer to *how* objects enable and constrain.” However, Davis moves further to propose additional considerations that must take place when dissecting theories of affordances: for example, by adding the important political questions of “*how, for whom, and under what circumstances*” (11; emphasis in original). Davis provides an update to affordance theory by advocating for the use of a mechanisms and conditions framework, which specifies “how technologies afford” (mechanisms) while situating this “how” in a particular context (conditions) (13).³ The affordances of smartphones vis-à-vis those belonging to *keitai* were highlighted in an educational corner within the NTT DoCoMo Museum, featuring a chart and displays of these devices stripped down to their hardware (Figure 0.4). The difference in visual affordances is stark, as *keitai* bear a smaller screen with monochrome specifications, while smartphones bear a larger screen that provides more colorful specifications. With regards to tactility, *keitai* bear ten keys for texting, while smartphones bear a sensitive touch panel. The heightened connectivity afforded by smartphones via WiFi and 4G/5G technology is a crucial difference. The connective, accessible affordances of smartphones mark

³ Davis delves into the more specific features of this framework. According to Davis, the mechanisms of affordance “indicate that technologies *request, demand, encourage, discourage, refuse, and allow* particular lines of action and social dynamics”. The conditions of affordance center on relationality, highlighting the roles of “*perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy*” (11).

these devices as their own “polymedia environment” (Madianou 2014; Madianou and Miller 2013).

Within its 2020 White Paper on the state of telecommunications (*jōhō tsūshin*) in Japan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC; *Sōmushō*) outlines the growing rate of smartphone ownership and Internet usage via smartphones. According to MIC, in 2019, the percentage of ownership of mobile devices in *households* was 96.1%, with smartphone ownership at 83.4% — the first time this percentage has crossed the threshold of 80%. Personal computers reached 69.1%, tablets 37.4%, and fixed landlines at 69.0% (MIC 2020, 336). With regards to *individual* mobile device ownership in 2019, the percentage of smartphone owners reached 67.6%, which is higher than mobile phone/PHS ownership by 43.5%. MIC highlights that the rate of smartphone ownership has been steadily increasing—this percentage was at 60.9% in 2017 and 64.7% in 2018 (336-37). Furthermore, MIC reveals that in 2019, Internet usage rate by device was recorded at 63.3% via smartphones, and 50.4% via personal computers (337-38). The primary purposes of Internet usage consisted of sending and receiving e-mails, searching information, and Social Networking Services (SNS). Here, it is important to note that SNS is the localized term for social media. SNS constituted 69.0% of Internet usage, and users between the ages of 20 and 29 were the most heavily represented user demographic (340). An updated examination of mobile phone and youth cultures in Reiwa Japan should focus specifically on the affordances of smartphones and the prevalence of SNS, which is sometimes viewed as inextricable from the hardware itself.



Figure 0.4: Educational corner within the NTT DoCoMo Museum demonstrating the differences between *keitai* and smartphones. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 0.5: Corners in which visitors can try NTT DoCoMo's historical and contemporary devices. The left image depicts a corner in which visitors can try out *keitai* from “long ago” (*mukashi no keitai*). The right image depicts a corner in which visitors can have hands-on experience with smartphones. Photograph taken by the author.

Steinberg (2019) brings attention to the fact that Android and iOS, mobile platforms that currently dominate the global market, were modeled after *keitai* and the affordances of i-mode (16-17). It is curious that despite its status as a pioneer in mobile communications, Japan is not well-represented in literature on SNS and smartphone usage. The current literature is dominated

by the case studies of the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. This dissertation aims to remedy this hegemony. Although SNS and smartphones are perceived to be ubiquitous, “universal” objects, these technologies are not uniform everywhere. These technologies are localized differently and are often revelatory of existing historical and societal dynamics in those contexts (Itō 2005; Miller 2012; Ellison and boyd 2013). This dissertation also aims to provide an update to *keitai* studies with a continued emphasis on context. Here, “context” encompasses a wide spectrum of phenomena: space and place, temporality, life stage, identity, and intergenerational attitudes. The context that drives my theoretical and analytical approach is the web of change and continuity in Japanese society.

Within its 2019 White Paper, MIC introduces “Society 5.0” as the vision for the future of Japanese society. Its predecessors include hunter-gatherer society (Society 1.0), agrarian society (Society 2.0), industrial society (Society 3.0), and information society (Society 4.0). In Society 5.0, “cyberspace” (*saibā kūkan*) and the “real world” (*genjitsu sekai*) are highly integrated. This integration not only fosters economic development, but also aids in solving social issues (MIC 2019, 2-3). For example, in the realm of daily living, drones and other self-driving technologies are used to assist in shopping. In the realm of medical care, remote diagnosis and surgery support is made possible by the boosted connectivity afforded by 5G technology (172). The “social issues” that form the backdrop of MIC’s discussion include Japan’s greying population and declining birthrate (*shōshi kōreika*), labor shortages, climate change, and natural disasters. Within its 2020 White Paper, MIC expands its discussion to include the COVID-19 pandemic as another issue to be “solved” by digitalization.

The call for an integration of “cyberspace” and the “real world” to solve the issues that plague contemporary Japan is an intriguing one. Practically speaking, advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, and digitalization can ameliorate these issues. But can these advancements truly solve them? What can be said for other social issues in contemporary Japan, including issues centering on sociality and intimacy?

Society 5.0, or Reiwa Japan, is the “context” that forms the backdrop of this dissertation. I am interested in how the digital can serve as a lens into understanding and observing social issues in contemporary Japan, particularly as these issues relate to sociality, intimacy, and identity. Scholars have identified the economic downturn of the 1990s as a moment that changed the very fabric of sociality in Japan. Brinton (2011) has discussed the erosion of *ba* (social location) that accompanied the downturn, as previously stable institutions and life courses became undone. The “lost generation,” or the young people who entered into adulthood during this period, were unable to attain the economic security that had been previously provided by the school to workplace pipeline. These young people became “lost in transition” (2). Allison (2013) has characterized this change in Japanese society as a shift from “Japan Inc.” to “liquified Japan” (21). Sociality in liquified Japan, she explains, has become “more punctuated and unhinged” (8). Allison further describes this change in sociality, as she states:

Along with replaceable work and workers is the rhythm of social impermanence: relationships that instantaneously connect, disconnect, or never start up in the first place. One-third of all Japanese live alone these days and the phenomena of both NEET (not in education, employment, or training) and hikikomori (social withdrawal) are well known among youths. As I’ve learned in the process of fieldwork in summers since 2008, many Japanese feel lonely, that they don’t belong (anywhere), and are struggling to get by. A recent special on public television encapsulated current conditions of social life with the label “*muen shakai*”—the relationless society. Social precarity. Liquified Japan. (Allison 2013, 8)

Anxieties regarding the supposed erosion of sociality in contemporary Japan are further embodied by discourse on *hikikomori* (literally “the withdrawn”), suicide, and solitary deaths (Borovoy 2008; Nozawa 2015; Saitō 2013).

I am interested in how the digital mediates sociality during these times. Most importantly, I am interested in how the role of the digital in mediating sociality is constantly renegotiated by users. In centering the voices of young people, who are disadvantaged in liquified Japan yet are frequently the targets of moral panic discourse on the shifting nature of sociality, I aim to provide a fuller picture of digital sociality. What are the new demands on the self that

accompany digital sociality? How are care and kinship mediated? What opportunities for community-building are made possible by the digital? What are the potentials and pitfalls of digital sociality and intimacy? These questions can best be examined through an ethnographic approach.

Digital Anthropology and Ethnographic Possibilities

This dissertation advocates for the radical potential of the digital in anthropology and ethnography. Digital anthropology is a burgeoning field that has made serious interventions: most notably, the central assertion that digital and virtual worlds are no less “real” than a so-called “physical” or “offline” world. In other words, digital anthropology contests dichotomies of physical/virtual and online/offline, along with associated characterizations of what constitutes a “real” world or “acceptable” form of sociality. Tom Boellstorff’s *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* is frequently characterized as the spark that ignited these interventions and digital anthropology’s subsequent growth as a field. In this ethnography, Boellstorff performed fieldwork as an anthropologist-avatar in the virtual world of *Second Life*. Through this fieldwork—which employed methods that are viewed as integral to “classic” ethnography, such as participant observation—Boellstorff revealed that the “virtual” world of *Second Life* bears its own culture and social practices. For many users of *Second Life*, the platform is a way of being rather than a mere game. Boellstorff emphasizes that virtual worlds must be studied in their own terms; however, he also proposes that virtual worlds can allow us to (re)consider or (re)define what it means to be human.

Since Boellstorff’s ethnography, digital anthropology and adjacent fields that utilize digital ethnography have expanded their scopes of inquiry. Scholars have focused on the potential of big data in ethnographic research (boyd and Crawford 2012; Pederson 2016; Knox and Nafus 2018). Questions of digital ontology, too, have captured the attention of some digital anthropologists (Knox and Walford 2016). Themes of content creation, internet celebrity, and influencer culture have also been explored through an ethnographic approach, most notably in

the works of anthropologist Crystal Abidin. Examinations of online gaming communities or “virtual worlds” have now expanded to include analyses of race and queerness (Gray 2018). The embeddedness of mobile devices such as smartphones in everyday life—directly relevant to this dissertation—has also been approached ethnographically in a variety of societal contexts (de Seta 2015; Miller et al 2021).

Digital anthropology provides a rich space for (re)considerations of the “tenets” of ethnography, especially given the complex parameters of confidentiality and anonymity in the digital sphere. In response to digital ethnographies such as Boellstorff’s work, Kelly (2016) suggests that digital ethnography augments the process of writing field notes and extends the reach of the ethnographic encounter (40). Miller (2012) advocates for renewed IRB protocols for digital ethnography and warns ethnographers about the dangers of recruiting interviewees and study participants on Facebook as these dangers relate to compromising anonymity. Similarly, Schrooten (2016) raises multiple concerns regarding the ethics of performing fieldwork within social media groups, such as the dilemma of whether an anthropologist should make their presence known to every single member of a social media group even if it risks the natural “flow” of the group. Orgad (2005) advocates for the combination of online and offline interactions with informants in order to build rapport and gain a more nuanced understanding how online participation affects their “offline” lives, and vice versa; however, she warns of risks such as biased views of the informant based on their online interactions. In *Doing Digital Ethnography: Private Messages from the Field*, a special issue of the *Journal of Digital Social Research* edited by Crystal Abidin and Gabriele de Seta, five digital ethnographers candidly discuss the methodological and ethical difficulties of digital ethnographic research. An important intervention made by this issue is its discussion of disciplinary posturing, bias, and gatekeeping. For example, de Seta (2020) introduces three archetypal figures—the “networked field-weaver,” the “eager participant-lurker,” and the “expert fabricator”—to illustrate the “discursive strategies, performative masks, and illusionary identities” that digital ethnographers may confront in their work (80).

At first glance, digital anthropology may arouse skepticism among anthropologists who believe that a “physical” field site is a requirement for ethnography. However, as the aforementioned scholars demonstrate, the digital provides opportunities for anthropologists to reflect on the core “tenets” of ethnographic fieldwork. The practice of “Being There”—a practice that has been discussed at length among anthropologists since Malinowski’s memorable discussion of his ethnographic work in the south coast of New Guinea—is a necessary and productive component of ethnography due to the experiences and encounters that it may yield (Malinowski 1984 [1922]; Geertz 1988; Borneman 2009). Such experiences include the collaborative nature of the relationship between the anthropologist and the interlocutors, along with the anthropologist’s own navigation of their positionality (Devereux 1967; Gardner 1999; Bondi 2003; Borneman 2009; Borneman 2011).

Boellstorff’s (2008) ethnography is a provocative model of how the nature of “Being There” is slowly transforming. Boellstorff does not delve into the nature of his own relationships and encounters with his interlocutors—he primarily focuses on the dynamics found within *Second Life*, which he characterizes as a culture. However, we can glean how dynamics of encounter, countertransference, and the intersubjective third may exist in this context. Boellstorff is technically “There” through the presence of his virtual avatar, Tom Bukowski. His engagements with avatar-interlocutors in the setting of “Ethnographia,” his virtual home, may carve a space for the intersubjective third that is not unlike the analyst’s room—he does, after all, conduct focus groups in Ethnographia. Encounters in the digital world of *Second Life* with avatar-interlocutors may provide an opportunity for transference and countertransference, even if they take the form of avatar movements and sending messages via chatrooms. My dissertation offers an exercise in re-examining the notion of “Being There” as a practice that also takes place in digital contexts. The practice of “Being There” in my fieldwork takes on two forms: my physical presence in Japan and in-person interactions with interlocutors, and my digital presence on platforms such as LINE and Instagram as an ethnographer-user.

Approaches from digital anthropology and digital ethnography can ameliorate impasses within media and area studies. Maitra and Chow (2015) have discussed the tendency of both fields to treat areas or regions as bearing fixed values, which reinforces bias. Lamarre (2017) has discussed the tendency of media studies to ignore the individual; furthermore, areas are treated as supplements for media and technologies. Anthropologists have long understood that societies, regions, and areas do not bear “fixed cultural values.” This is not to discount the violence of anthropology, particularly its role in colonialism. In discussing an anthropological approach as a potential workaround for the impasses of media and area studies, I seek to emphasize the strength of digital anthropology and ethnography in centering the individual while also highlighting digital technologies and the larger network of society.

Japan’s status as a technological pioneer has resulted in imaginations of Japan as a hyper-technologized “Other.” Kanesaka (2022) has noted how “fears of loneliness and alienation” are projected onto Japan as a “high tech dystopia.” This, Kanesaka explains, is also evident in the work of Sherry Turkle, who uses the examples of Japanese robotics, such as Paro the therapeutic robotic seal, to take issue with the reliance on robots for intimacy and companionship (Kanesaka 2022, Paragraph 17; Turkle 2011). While I draw upon Turkle’s examinations of the self in this dissertation, I resist the blanketed fear and anxiety that is projected onto Japan. I also resist discourse on “uniqueness.” I am speaking about smartphone and SNS usage taking place in a specific context, moment, and genealogy of digital technologies. Throughout this dissertation, I use terms such as “Japanese Twitter” and “Japanese SNS.” The use of “Japanese” aims to ground my analysis in the particular context of Japan. The use of “Japanese” also refers to the use of these platforms in a particular language. This choice was not made lightly, as I am aware that such phrasing seems to imply “uniqueness”. However, other phrasings do not quite fit the bill. “Twitter in Japan” would hint at a rigid geographic context, potentially excluding diasporic communities and Japanese users who are temporarily living abroad. “Twitter Japan” would refer to the corporation of the same name. As I explain throughout this dissertation, SNS and digital technologies, while seemingly “universal”, are used and imagined differently based on context. It

is crucial for scholars who study digital media and Japan to think critically about their position as being rooted in one area of focus that engages with questions of ubiquity and specificity (digital media) and one field of study that is haunted by discourse on “uniqueness” (Japanese Studies).

Some of the dynamics, practices, and narratives that I outline in this dissertation are not specific to Japan. That is the point. As I have previously mentioned, examinations of the intersections between society, social media usage, and smartphone usage have largely centered on the geographic contexts of the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The hegemony of the United States in this literature is especially prevalent, given that the most popular platforms and devices have been birthed in Silicon Valley. The United States is not, and should not, be the default. A focus on Japan offers an opportunity to highlight digital networks beyond the context of the United States—I have seen much literature on social media and smartphone usage that marks “Western” contexts as a “universal standard.” A major goal of my research is to create space and opportunities for transnational considerations and collaborations centering on digital culture and digital ethnography, within and beyond East Asia.

This dissertation aims to make readers think about their own social media and smartphone usage. Learning about perceptions and patterns of SNS and smartphone usage in other locations allows us to reflect upon our own perceptions and patterns. My interlocutors in Japan frequently asked me about my own perceptions and patterns as an American, along with those of my American friends. They wanted to know the similarities as a way of bridging distances. Similarly, when presenting my research to university students in the United States, students often responded with emphatic nods. They saw parts of themselves in my interlocutors. Students also would inform me that my presentations, which juxtapose interlocutors’ stories with the state of digital sociality in Japan, made them think more deeply about their own usage and the state of digital sociality in their home countries.

Methodology

As part of my dissertation research, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Japan—particularly Tokyo, Chiba, and Yokohama—between August 2019 and August 2020, and remotely between August 2020 and October 2021. This fieldwork consisted of preliminary semi-structured interviews and multiple conversations with 35 individuals and close followings of 6 “core” interlocutors, participant observation as locations and events relevant to SNS and smartphone usage, engaged use of the platforms described by interlocutors, and literary and media analysis of sources in Japanese.⁴ I focused primarily on speaking to young people between the ages of 15 and 26. This demographic is represented as bearing the highest rate of SNS use, as outlined in government white papers and market analysis. This age range seems well beyond what some may characterize as youth. In this study, “youth” is based on life stage. The age range within my study is significant in that it embodies transitions from high school, to university, and to post-graduate life. While such transitions are tied to institutions, they are also tied to certain subjectivities: the high schooler, the college student, and the *shakaijin* (working adult). Each subjectivity is also tied to certain forms of smartphone and SNS usage—along with societal imaginations of such usage. In expanding the definition of “youth” to encompass significant life stages, I was able to observe the roles that the digital played in young people’s navigation of these major transitions. Many interlocutors were on the cusp of life transitions.

The interlocutors who generously aided me throughout my fieldwork were predominantly university students and *shakaijin* in their mid-twenties. I was able to recruit university students through arranged classroom visits. The *shakaijin* within this dissertation were individuals whom I had serendipitously met in the field, individuals whom I had previously known, and individuals who were introduced to me by other interlocutors. In terms of identity, many of the young people who volunteered to participate in my study were girls and young women. This is perhaps

⁴ These numbers do not include the fleeting yet insightful encounters with individuals who shared their thoughts with me throughout the fieldwork. If these encounters were included, the sample size would near 50 individuals.

attributed to our shared gender identity, which potentially fostered a sense of safety and openness (Gershon 2010, 11-12). Several interlocutors bore diverse identities as returnees (*kikokushijo*) and mixed-race individuals. While some scholars have taken issue with the diversity of my sample, I believe that it represents Japan's growing multiculturalism.

During my fieldwork, I also sought the opinions and narratives of adults and parents. Such narratives are important in providing a bigger picture of SNS and smartphone usage in Japan. Furthermore, adult narratives highlight the various imaginations of youth smartphone and SNS that may very well be a product of generational differences. My conversations with families provided an interesting lens into the roles that the digital plays in care—or, more specifically, “care-at-distance and intimate co-presence” (Ohashi et al 2017, 11). Similar to the *shakaijin* within this dissertation, my adult interlocutors were individuals whom I had serendipitously met in the field, individuals whom I had previously known, and individuals who were introduced to me by other interlocutors.

My conversations with interlocutors involved light discussion of topics such as favorite SNS trends and accounts, along with deep reflections of the role of SNS and smartphones in everyday life. Questions such as “How would you characterize the role of SNS and smartphones in your social life?” and “Do you think that your social life would change if you did not own a smartphone or use SNS?” were met with smirks, laughter, and pensive body language. Interlocutors recounted their personal history of using SNS and smartphones, along with their current patterns of usage. Often, interlocutors would show me their own SNS profiles, their favorite accounts, recently liked posts, and the like. They also shared stories about their personalized smartphone cases and wallpapers (Figure 0.6).



Figure 0.6: Interlocutor smartphones. On the left, Himawari, a high schooler, shows a picture of a fruit sandwich that had appeared on her Instagram feed. Fruit sandwiches were a trendy food item among schoolgirls at the time. On the right, Takashi, Himawari’s brother and a university student, allows me to take a photograph of his amusing smartphone cover case. Photographs taken by the author.

The names of the interlocutors within this dissertation are pseudonyms. I gave interlocutors the option of selecting their own pseudonyms, as anthropologist Ilana Gershon did in her study of online breakups. For this reason, some of the pseudonyms may be silly or strange to readers. For example, Haribo, a *shakaijin*, based her pseudonym on her love of gummy bears.⁵ When interlocutors could not decide on a pseudonym, I selected one for them. A full chat of the interlocutors featured in this dissertation can be found in the Appendix.

My fieldwork was concentrated in Tokyo, Chiba, and Yokohama. I frequented events and locations centering on SNS and smartphone usage, such as “Instagram Lectures” hosted by

⁵ Some interlocutors also chose “foreign” names, in the case of Lulu, a *shakaijin*. But since my interlocutors were also diverse and included mixed race and mixed heritage individuals, there are cases in which these seemingly “foreign” names are also an index of their identity. These interlocutors include Anne, Audrey, Grace, and Joel.

marketing specialists in Tokyo. I visited locations that were heavily featured on SNS such as Instagram—I discuss my fieldwork in *instabae* (“Instagenic”) locations in Chapters 1 and 2. I also went on outings with interlocutors. While these outings were simply a means of developing rapport and “hanging out,” the topic of the digital was always approached. For example, it was not uncommon for interlocutors to take photos on their smartphone and create SNS posts in my presence.

The digital component of my fieldwork entailed my use of popular SNS as a way of getting acquainted with their features and associated trends and my engagement with interlocutors on SNS. My own smartphone served as both an intimate communicative device and an essential fieldwork tool. I used my smartphone to stay in touch with interlocutors, and also used it as an audio recorder, camera, and notebook for fieldnotes on the fly. With the use of the digital in fieldwork comes a particular set of ethical precautions and demands. The process of receiving consent was constant throughout my fieldwork—this process went beyond the initial presentation of a consent form to my interlocutors at the start of my fieldwork. Interlocutors willingly allowed me to follow their SNS profiles and followed my own profiles. One interlocutor, Yasushi, insisted that I give him my personal Instagram account rather than my research account, because he was giving me access to his own personal account. The mutual following of accounts that took place between myself and my interlocutors constituted mutual access, but this did not necessarily guarantee consent for my noting of their posts in my fieldnotes. Thus, I frequently asked for consent whenever I wished to record a post or conversation of interest in my notes.

A final component of my fieldwork was my collection and analysis of literary and media sources in Japanese. Primary literary sources included press releases, government white papers, marketing data, magazines, newspapers, online blog posts, and books. I accessed many of these sources during visits to bookstores, libraries such as the National Diet Library, and museum-archives such as the NTT DoCoMo Museum. Similar to anthropologist Anne Allison’s approach in *Precarious Japan*, I also gathered stories from the media—not just from my interlocutors or

encounters in the field (17). Television shows, films, dramas, and videos uploaded to SNS served as primary media sources.

Preliminary Narrations of SNS and Smartphone Usage

Three objectives informed my approach: 1) explore the smartphone as both tool and an intimate communicative device, 2) understand platforms and their features, and how these platforms fit into a wider media ecology not limited to the smartphone, and 3) center the user and their experiences, their characterizations of platforms, and their incorporation of digital technologies in their daily rhythms. The concepts of affordances, imagined affordances, and media ideologies grounded my approach. boyd (2014) explains that SNS enable the creation of “networked publics,” which are simultaneously “the space constructed through networked technologies” and “the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (8). According to boyd, the affordances of these networked publics include persistence (“the durability of online expressions and content”), visibility (“the potential audience who can bear witness”), spreadability (“the ease with which content can be shared”), and searchability (“the ability to find content”) (10-11). Youth engagement with SNS often involves “seamlessly moving between” platforms based on affordances and the situated context of these platforms, which is often co-constituted among users (38-41).

The frameworks of imagined affordances and media ideologies provide helpful insight into the constructions of “norms” related to digital platforms. Nagy and Neff (2015) characterize imagined affordances as the expectations and perceptions that users have of certain technologies that “in effect and practice, shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested.” Furthermore, imagined affordances result from entanglements “between users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers” (5). Similarly, media ideologies emerge from how users perceive a certain medium, often vis-à-vis other media.

Gershon (2010) defines media ideologies as “a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning” (3). The value of context is evident in the proliferation in literature devoted to detailed discussion of the affordances and biographies of certain SNS (Burgess and Green 2009; Burgess and Baym 2020; Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020).

At the start of my fieldwork, youth interlocutors spoke enthusiastically of the informative, communicative, and entertaining affordances of SNS—and by extension, smartphones. While there were differences in some responses, many of my conversations with interlocutors featured overlapping themes and even shared phrases. Different iterations of the phrase “I can’t imagine life without it” were especially prevalent in response to the indispensability of both SNS and smartphones in daily tasks and sociality. At times, smartphones were narrated as *karada no ichibu*, or “part of my body.” Lulu, a *shakaijin* in her mid-twenties, recounted the “traumatic” experience of dropping her phone in the train tracks during her morning commute. Without her phone, her daily rhythm had been impacted—she could not check communications from work, and she could not entertain herself during her lunch break. Since this experience, Lulu wears her phone on a strap around her neck.

Nearly every interlocutor commented that their friends and family members all have smartphones. The exception was Riko, a university student, who mentioned that her mother still owns a *garakei* and knows train routes by memory. However, in a follow-up conversation, Riko revealed that her mother eventually purchased a smartphone, albeit begrudgingly. There was a certain timeline shared by many youth interlocutors with regards to their first acquisition of a smartphone. It was not uncommon for interlocutors to own a “hand-me-down” *garakei* or smartphone from their parents before acquiring their own. Interlocutors with siblings mentioned that this device would also be shared. The turning point that typically marked the acquisition of their own personal smartphone was university or shortly before graduating high school. This acquisition was motivated by the need to commute to their school—often, parents explained that a smartphone would be crucial for safety and urgent communication either en route to school or

on their commute home. While new commutes were narrated as the main reason behind acquisition of personal smartphones, interlocutors also confessed that they also wished to acquire a smartphone because their friends and classmates at the time were also acquiring these devices. Thus, there was a blending of necessity and desire.

The aforementioned responses can be attributed not only to the perceived ubiquity and high rate of smartphone ownership and usage in Japan, but also due to the wide range of “tools” that these devices offer. “It’s like everything,” Yoshi, a university student, mentioned before listing several tools that he accesses via his device: an alarm function, the mobile payment application or “app” known as Apple Pay, and his “Suica” refillable train pass. Manatsu, a *shakaijin* in her early twenties, characterized her smartphone as a *hitsujuhin*, or a “necessity”. Indeed, other interlocutors referred to their devices in a similar way. This was especially the case in discussions of urgent communication and information acquisition in disaster-prone Japan. Mai, a university student, mentioned that her father had pre-downloaded several disaster apps into her smartphone when purchasing it for her, including Yahoo’s *Bōsai Sokuho* (Disaster Preparedness Bulletin) app and an earthquake emergency notification app known as *Yurekuru Kōru*. Indeed, apps such as *Bōsai Sokuho* were crucial during my own stay in Japan, which coincided with Typhoon Hagibis, a powerful and deadly typhoon that struck Japan in October 2019.

Along with the perceived role of SNS and smartphones as constituting a sort of “toolkit” that greatly assists with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, interviewees spoke extensively of the social dimension of these technologies. Chinami, a *shakaijin* in her mid-twenties, noted that smartphones and SNS are necessary to “live a fun life,” citing the role of these technologies in communicating with friends, coordinating meetups with friends, and checking train times in order to physically meet with friends. In other words, these technologies aid in the facilitation of social encounters both online and offline. Many interlocutors spoke of the centrality of SNS and smartphones in connecting with acquaintances, family members, and even strangers with similar interests and hobbies. However, not all SNS play the same roles in facilitating sociality. Grace, a

shakaijin in her mid-twenties, reminded me of this during her interview: “The use of SNS differs based on the app.” Indeed, interlocutors provided detailed lists of the imagined affordances and media ideologies of SNS. Haribo, a *shakaijin* in her mid-twenties, provided the following list: LINE as a means of communicating (*renraku o toru*), Instagram as a platform to have fun by browsing images (*gazō de tanoshimu*), Twitter as receiving and sharing information embodied by the “now” (*ima no kimochi*), Facebook as a means of connecting with individuals around the world (*sekai no hito o tsunagu*), and YouTube as a platform to enjoy videos (*dōga o tanoshimu*).

LINE was frequently narrated by interlocutors as a platform that has become the norm in sociality and the logistics of everyday life. Furthermore, LINE was usually the first SNS ever used and downloaded by interlocutors. The chat function and capacity for free phone calls mark LINE as indispensable, facilitating a communication that is “quick” (*subayai*). As such, interlocutors had a difficult time pinpointing the exact length of time they use LINE on a daily basis—instead, variants of the phrase “always” and “whenever” were used. This demonstrates the difficulty in clearly demarcating “online” and “offline,” a dynamic also prevalent in earlier *keitai* usage as previously explicated by Itō (Itō 2005, 15). LINE has become central in the building of relationships in schools, even playing a key role in the maintenance of communication in school organizations, clubs, or “circles.” Audrey, a university student, mentioned that she had to download and use LINE because *everyone* was using it. While in university, she recounted acquiring 300 contacts just for her circle. In addition to LINE, interlocutors who had spent time abroad or had family abroad were more likely to use Snapchat, What’sApp, and Facebook to stay in touch.

The various functions of LINE, ranging from free video chats to the offering of cute “stamps” or “stickers,” mark LINE as a “super app” (Steinberg 2020). Steinberg characterizes LINE as “the portal or hub for all smartphone life, displacing the smartphone OS as the ground upon which the smartphone experience is built” (Steinberg 2019, 225). LINE usage is not limited to a particular age demographic, and is central to family caretaking practices or “care-at-distance” (Ohashi et al 2017). Indeed, LINE is perceived as so central to everyday life that

several interlocutors forgot that the platform exists within the category of SNS. Although technically an SNS, LINE has displaced e-mail or text messaging. Takenori, a university student, described his media ideology of communication: smartphone users exchange LINE contact information rather than phone numbers or e-mail accounts. However, he mentioned that the exchange of Instagram accounts, rather than LINE accounts, is gradually becoming the new norm for “casual exchange.” According to Takenori, exchanging LINE accounts insinuates a pressure to message the individual. There is less of a pressure with Instagram—one can “stay in touch” by simply viewing and sharing posts.

Instagram was frequently narrated as the most popular SNS in Japan. The popularity of Instagram is attributed to its role in allowing users to stay in touch with friends, view their daily updates, and “follow” accounts that embody users’ shared interests and hobbies. Furthermore, Instagram grants users a degree of self-expression and creativity—or as Grace stated, the ability to “broadcast yourself” (*jibun o hasshin suru*). In this vein, it is not uncommon to have multiple accounts to show different content or “selves” to different audiences. Interlocutors mentioned that they enjoyed the ability to gaze into the lives of celebrities via their public Instagram accounts, even if the content within these profiles may be questionably “authentic.” Vibrant visuality is yet another reason for Instagram’s popularity, echoed by the *instabae* or “Instagenic” boom. Most importantly, Instagram’s affordances of hashtags and the search bar are becoming a source of information for users, as users can search for trends, potential places to visit, and the like.

Interlocutors mentioned that daily conversations with acquaintances have increasingly revolved around questions such as “Did you see that post on Instagram?”. Thus, interlocutors confessed that they would feel “behind” if they did not use Instagram. Without Instagram, it is difficult to stay “on top” of trends, news, or happenings in acquaintances’ lives. Mako, a university student, confessed that due to her shy nature, she would have trouble selecting conversation topics if she did not use SNS. She explained that when first meeting individuals,

her “go-to” conversation topics center on photos, hobbies, and the exchange of Instagram accounts.

Twitter was narrated by multiple interlocutors as a valuable source of information in the form of word of mouth (*kuchikomi*). However, the platform was also narrated as the “dark side” of the Internet. This characterization was attributed to the large percentage of anonymous accounts among Japanese users of Twitter. Such anonymous accounts, interlocutors explained, played a role in the intense cyberbullying and “flaming” (*enjō*) that takes place on the platform. However, several interlocutors mentioned that this anonymity can also provide a sense of safety for those seeking community, citing the notable presence of *otaku* users as a case study. As explained by Elsa, a university student who turns to Twitter for advice on her nail-biting habits, this is also the case for those who are seeking affirmation and solidarity.

Video-centric SNS such as YouTube and TikTok were narrated as a way of “killing time” (*himatsubushi*). TikTok grew in popularity during my fieldwork and was particularly popular among younger interlocutors. The short nature of videos on the platform facilitate *himatsubushi*, but often cause interlocutors to lose track of time. “Suddenly, it’s like 2 AM!” Joel exclaimed when referring to his TikTok usage. The aforementioned descriptions of interlocutors’ imagined affordances and media ideologies as they relate to SNS demonstrate that while individual practices differ, there is a surprising harmony in beliefs on the particular roles that SNS play in everyday social life. There are differences, though, in individual experience with these digital technologies. The chapters of this dissertation address a wide spectrum of user practices, narrations, and concerns.

Overview of Chapters

Each chapter of this dissertation opens and ends with a “Mediation,” or ethnographic vignette. My use of episodic vignettes written in the “ethnographic present” is inspired by anthropologist John Borneman’s use of the episodic in *Syrian Episodes: Sons, Fathers, and an*

Anthropologist in Aleppo. Borneman explains that the ethnographic present grants texts “more of a sense of the immediacy of situations” (2007, xii). Borneman discusses the episodic as a necessary intervention in writing and interpretation, as he states:

In retrospect, I have come to think that the quality of writing as well as our interpretive skills has been compromised by subsuming all listening, viewing, observation, interaction, comparison, and contextualization into historical narratives. Lost is the accidental, incidental, and occasional; the serendipitous, fateful, and irregular; events and scenes that don’t always hang together, that resist facile inclusion in a temporal development or argument. Lost is the episodic: experience that is personal, tied to a particular time and place, a part that does not always readily fit into the whole. (Borneman 2007, xii)

In using the episodic, I wish to illustrate the vivacity of my encounters in the field and my interactions with interlocutors. My relationships with interlocutors did not only consist of interviews and conversations on SNS and smartphones. Our relationships involved the mutual sharing of intimate details about our lives, “hangouts” in local cafes, impassioned rants about the pressures of being a twenty-something, and more. The story of digital sociality is a story about everyday life—the episodic is well-suited as a form of storytelling. My use of the term “Mediation” is based on Pink’s (2008) and Witmore’s (2004) discussions of the term. Witmore defines mediation as a “process that allows us to attain richer and fuller translations of bodily experience and materiality that are located, multi-textured, reflexive, sensory and polysemious” (60). While Witmore is speaking about archaeology, Pink suggests that this definition applies to ethnographic placemaking and sensory ethnography (2008, 192). In calling my episodes “Mediations,” I want to foreground the experiential and sensorial dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork. The term is also a reference to the overarching theme of this dissertation: mediation of the self, sociality, and intimacy.

Chapter 1, “Vibrant Visuality and the Ideal: The Digital Sensorium of *Instabae* as Media Mix and Ethnographic Practice,” discusses *instabae* (“Instagenic”) culture and practices in Japan. I offer a description of Instagram’s media ideologies and affordances, drawing upon interlocutors’ narrations of the platform. I discuss *instabae* as a photographic practice or

“iphoneography” that fits within Japan’s media mix. I propose that *instabae* is more than a visual representation. Instagram, and perhaps the smartphone camera by extension, has become a *lens* for how to view one’s own surroundings. I propose that chasing *instabae* is an exercise in sensory and multimodal ethnography. I discuss my own ethnographic process and map the nuances between space represented online and space as it exists offline, drawing upon interlocutors’ use of the terms *instabae*, *shoboi* (lackluster), and *riaru* (real).

In Chapter 2, “Digitizing Women’s Worlds: Gender, Visual Participatory Culture, and ‘New’ Mediatic Assemblages,” I map the flows of change and continuity, divergence and convergence, as they relate to the intersections of gender, sociality, consumerism, and visual participatory culture in contemporary Japan. I return to the case study of Instagram usage in Japan to propose that visual participatory culture such as *instabae* culture is an extension of already-existing social practices among girls and women that center on visibility and materiality—namely, *purikura* (“print club”) culture. I then draw upon the second case study of the Nippon Travel Agency’s (NTA) *#tabijeni* campaign, a tourism initiative focusing on photogenic destinations, to highlight how an analysis of digital worlds and participatory cultures can allow us to return to historical marketing literature and consumerist practices.

Chapter 3, “Not a Trend: Digital Activism, Black Lives Matter, and Black Japanese Storytelling as Praxis,” discusses digital activism in Japan, including activist responses to the Triple Disaster of March 11th, 2011, the #MeToo and #KuToo movements, and online demonstrations against the Japanese government’s treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The bulk of the chapter highlights the reception of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement among Japanese users of Social Networking Services (SNS), with a focus on Instagram and Twitter. I highlight how Black Japanese users in particular utilize these SNS to share their personal experiences of anti-Black racism as a way of educating their Japanese friends and followers on the dimensions of racism in Japan and the significance of the BLM movement. I draw on user narratives, media analysis, and vignettes from my fieldwork in Japan—which coincided with the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing global BLM demonstrations—to illustrate how these

acts of sharing and educating were in response to claims such as “racism does not exist in Japan” and misunderstandings of BLM as a fleeting social media “trend.”

In Chapter 4, “Are the Kids Alright? Danger, Risk, and Harm in Public Discourse,” I highlight the myriad safety concerns that accompany narrations of smartphone and SNS usage. I draw upon media coverage and conversations with interlocutors to examine these concerns. While adult interlocutors vocalized concerns about “addiction,” youth interlocutors extensively discussed issues of cyberbullying and deteriorating mental health. I discuss these intergenerational concerns within the context of the disintegration of previously stable institutions in Japan. I also discuss the new demands on the self that accompany the use of digital technologies and situate these new demands into the larger literature on processes of self-making in Japan.

In the dissertation’s conclusion, “Intimate Solitudes and Solidarities: Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic,” I discuss the impact of COVID-19 on SNS and smartphone usage, utilizing data from follow-up conversations with interlocutors. I discuss the crucial role that SNS and smartphones played in Japan’s response to the pandemic, ranging from government collaborations with LINE to the widespread use of accountability tools such as Instagram’s *ouchi jikan* (“Home Time”). Returning to interlocutors’ narratives of digital embeddedness as outlined in “Are the Kids Alright?”, I discuss how the complex reactions of youths towards the sudden, complete “digitalization” of their social lives raise many questions regarding the future of digital sociality in Japan, taken-for-grantedness, and the construction of new “norms.” I include a reflection of the impact of the pandemic on my fieldwork before closing with further reflections on the intimacies, possibilities, and obstacles set forth by the digital.

The digital is always changing. The platforms and devices that I discuss in this dissertation may very well decline in popularity in the coming years. However, in line with the work of Gershon (2010) and Chun (2016), I aim to provide a set of inquiries and framings that will still be relevant for future studies of “new” media. I especially hope that readers of this

dissertation will be encouraged to employ digital ethnographic methods in their own examinations of digital sociality.

Chapter One

Vibrant Visuality and the Ideal:

The Digital Sensorium of *Instabae* as Media Mix and Ethnographic Practice

Mediation: Lingerin Scent, Fadin Shine

Akiko is in her late 50s. I first met her while waiting for a bus in Yokohama in 2017. At the time, I was enrolled in a language program in nearby Minato Mirai. As we shared the same morning commute, Akiko eventually approached me and began a casual conversation about my reason for moving to Yokohama. Akiko would be a central figure in my life in both Yokohama and Tokyo, always meeting with me for strolls in Minato Mirai or lunch in Tokyo whenever I was back in the field. I originally did not plan on asking Akiko to be an interlocutor for my dissertation. However, as I learned more about Akiko and she learned more about my research, our conversations eventually evolved into elaborate discussions.

Akiko is a member of a Leonardo DiCaprio fan club based in the Tokyo-Yokohama metropolitan area. The group, to which she referred to as “Leo Tomo,” largely consisted of women in their 40s and 50s. Leo Tomo originated as an online messaging board in which users discussed their admiration of Leo and his films. Furthermore, the group served as a way to crowdsource information and gossip about Leo. These online interactions would eventually transition to offline contexts, as users would also arrange to meet at red carpet events or screenings. Leo’s visits to Japan were significant events that necessitated prior planning, including but not limited to booking hotel rooms, designing commemorative t-shirts and banners, and waiting in line for hours on end. Over the years, Leo Tomo would gain and lose members, though the practices remained largely unchanged. The medium did, however, eventually shift from an online messaging board to a group LINE chat. The crowdsourcing of information would eventually include posts from Instagram, Twitter, and other SNS.

It is mid-September of 2019, and Akiko and I are disembarking at Shibuya Station. “Oh god, there are so many youths...kind of makes me nervous!” Akiko shrieks out loud. Once we emerge from the subway station and find ourselves near the infamous Scramble Crossing, Akiko asks if we can search for a nearby bar that Leonardo DiCaprio had visited during his trip to Japan the previous week. I enthusiastically agree, and Akiko hasten to a nearby police officer to ask for directions. He points towards Nonbeicho, known in English as “Drunkard’s Alley.” The officer then pauses, before warning in an ominous tone: “Please be careful.” As Akiko and I walk towards the direction of Nonbeicho, we begin to giggle at this ominous farewell.

Nonbeicho is a cramped alley lined with very small bars that cannot accommodate more than three to five people each. Paper lanterns hang from above, not yet illuminated since the sun had not yet set. Akiko begins to take pictures on her phone, but also begins to compare photos that had been uploaded onto Instagram by Leo’s bodyguard. As we weave through the bars, we eventually encounter a woman sweeping the area in front of one bar. Akiko approaches her and politely inquires if she knows of Leonardo DiCaprio’s whereabouts in Nonbeicho the week before. The woman, a bartender, confirms that the celebrity had been in the area, although she does not know where he had gone. We continue to weave through the bars, and Akiko eventually stops in front of an ornate door. “This is it!” She exclaims, saying that she remembered the door from Instagram. She takes multiple photos. Still standing in front of the door, Akiko then begins to tap away at her phone screen. I would find out that Akiko was sending the photos to the Leo Tomo LINE group, announcing that she was visiting Nonbeicho with her American friend.⁶ Akiko turns to me to announce that replies are flooding from the LINE group, exclaiming that Leo’s *nokoriga* must be there.

Nokoriga translates literally to “lingering scent.” Leo Tomo’s excited exclamations that Leo’s scent must be lingering in the cramped alleys of Nonbeicho can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the *uncanniness* of being physically present in a space that had been

⁶ My identity as an American had always been of interest to Akiko, especially since she was a fan of Hollywood. In a sense, having an “American friend” was viewed as a sort of social capital.

inhabited by the beloved actor only a week prior. This uncanniness is not only a feeling, but also a sensorial experience—a scent, a grasping of the ephemerality of presence and encounter. *Nokoriga* is also a practice, a *chasing* of a scent. One month later, when meeting Akiko in the streets of Akihabara, Akiko shows me a photo of Camila Morrone, Leonardo DiCaprio’s partner at the time, taking a photo near the Taito Game Station. As I recognize the bright red sign of the game station from previous trips to the area, I lead Akiko to the location. At the crosswalk, Akiko takes out her smartphone and begins to take photos that she would eventually send to Leo Tomo—similar to the episode in *Nonbeicho*.



Figure 1.1: Akiko taking a photo of the Taito Game Station, where Leonardo DiCaprio and Camila Morrone had passed by during their trip to Tokyo.

Placemaking—in this case, the practice of visiting popular spots featured on visual-centric SNS such as Instagram—was a common theme that I encountered in my fieldwork. It was especially prevalent in my interactions with Mako, a second-year university student. My first conversation with Mako took place in a café that she had suggested beforehand. She would reveal to me that she had found the café on Instagram by simply inputting “Ichigaya” and “café” in the search box. For Mako, Instagram is a valuable source of information with regards to

planning outings, finding hidden gems, and dreaming of future vacation spots. Furthermore, it is a valuable way of staying in touch with friends and new acquaintances. She recalls that when meeting other test takers at an examination center, the group all exchanged their Instagram usernames afterwards. Most importantly, Instagram is also a platform that Mako can use to start conversations and show her followers what *she* is up to. Offering an example, Mako reveals that she takes photos of her food so that she can upload them onto Instagram and speak to her friends about the experience. Almost in cue with our conversation, we notice that the young women sitting next to us are hurriedly putting on makeup and re-arranging the items on their table. Once their food arrives, the young women begin to take multiple photos. Mako and I exchange knowing grins. Wondering if the young women wanted a group photo, I lean over and offer to take their photo. One member of the group passes me her smartphone. I proceed to take multiple photos. I smile before commenting: “*Instabae* (Instagenic)!” The owner of the smartphone smiles before replying enthusiastically: “*Yatta* (yay)!”

Instagram constituted the core of my ongoing conversations with Mako. While sitting at a coffee shop in Odaiba in late July, Mako explains to me the sometimes disappointing difference between the “shining” aesthetic of some locations as they are represented on Instagram versus how they actually appear “in reality” (*riaru*). “You said that *instabae* is better than *riaru*, why is that?” I ask. “So...if it’s *riaru*, it’s more *shoboi* (lackluster) than you thought...for example, have you been to the Shibuya Scramble Crossing?” Mako remarks, before breaking out into laughter. “Isn’t it so *shoboi* in person compared to how it looks on TV?” Mako asks.

I nod and laugh in agreement. The Shibuya Scramble Crossing is one of the most crowded crosswalks in Tokyo. Local and international media portrayals of the crossing often feature a bird’s eye view of the assemblage of pedestrians—so large in number that they appear as ants—and the fluorescent lights of large television screens that project advertisements overhead. The crossing is a popular tourist attraction and is narrated as an embodiment of the hustle-and-bustle of Tokyo life. However, the crossing itself arguably loses its “magic” in person. Admittedly, during my multiple visits to the site, I found the crowdedness to be quite

overwhelming. I was pushed around and the experience of actually joining pedestrians in crossing the intersection was hurried and brief—an experience that felt less iconic than I had envisioned. The fluorescence of the large televisions combined with the booming voices and catchy jingles of the projected advertisements overloaded the senses. Yet despite the hectic nature of the crossing, visitors frequently posed for photoshoots in the center of the swarming pedestrians, scrambling to get their shots in before the walking signal turned red. “It’s surprising, isn’t it?” Mako begins. “You’re really like, ‘*Kore?! (This is it?!)*’ There are so many places like that, but you don’t want to show them in that state, right? Since you’ve made the effort of going.”

Mako’s comment reminded me of part of my methodology, which involved visiting locations or establishments that had been heavily featured on Instagram. A particular episode came to mind, which had taken place in Jiyugaoka. This trendy neighborhood in Meguro, Tokyo, is well-known for its cafes and boutiques. It is also well-known for “La Vita,” a small area of the neighborhood resembling Venice. Since La Vita had been trending for quite some time under the *instabae* hashtag on Instagram, I made the trek to Jiyugaoka to observe it in person. While La Vita appeared bright and picturesque on Instagram, it was grim and dirty in-person. The canal’s water, while appearing bright blue in photos uploaded to the platform, was actually a muddy green. I recall this episode aloud to Mako, who suddenly interjects once “La Vita” escapes my lips. “I went there! Wasn’t it so *shoboi?!?*” Mako remarks excitedly, before breaking out into laughter.

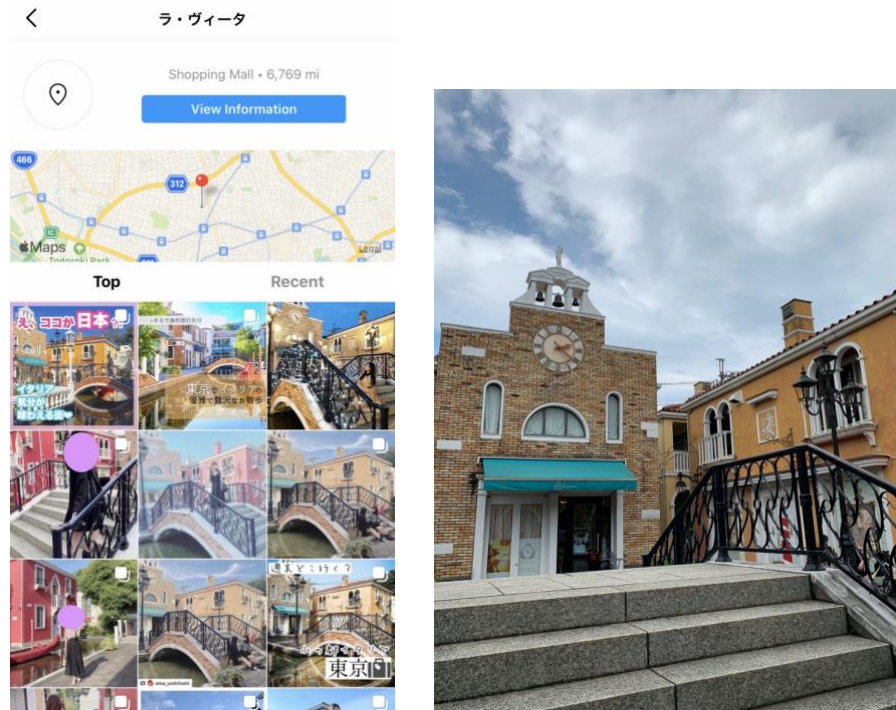


Figure 1.2: Representation of La Vita on Instagram (left) versus offline ontology (right). Left screenshot taken in May 2021. Right photograph taken by the author in July 2020.



Chasing a scent. Capturing a shine. The phrases *nokoriga* and *instabae* refer to practices that are not only digital but also sensorial. In this chapter, I examine the vibrant visuality of *instabae* (Instagenic) culture in Japan. I propose that *instabae* is more than a visual representation. Instagram, and perhaps the smartphone camera by extension, has become a *lens* for how to view one's own surroundings. I map the nuances between space represented online and space as it exists offline. Chasing the glimmer of *instabae* also involves chasing other sensorial experiences—whether such experiences are tactile, visual, aural, fragrant, or flavorful. Chasing *instabae* is an exercise in sensory and multimodal ethnography.

In the first section, I discuss the affordances of Instagram, focusing on its localization in Japan. I present user narrations of the platform's role in daily life as a way to contextualize Instagram's place in media ideologies of SNS in Japan. In the second section, I examine how

instabae fits within a rich history of camera phone studies within and beyond Japan. In the third section, I situate the vibrant visuality of *instabae* and Instagram within media convergence theory. Drawing upon the work of scholars focusing on media convergence in/of Japan, I argue that *instabae* and Instagram may be considered as a form of media mix that integrates space/place. In the fourth section, I introduce my own experience of conducting an ethnography of *instabae*, which is inherently a visual and sensorial affair that involves engagement with physical landscapes/objects and their digital representations. I offer ethnographic vignettes to highlight the dissonance that sometimes exists between “shiny” digital representations and their “lackluster” offline ontology. I focus on the potential(s) of the smartphone camera and Instagram in digital ethnography, sensory ethnography, and multimodal research. I then conclude with a discussion of the ethnographer as part of the assemblage of the “field site,” which includes media mix. In providing the example of *instabae*, I wish to be in dialogue with notable examinations of Instagram, particularly by Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin.⁷ I build upon the ideas of these scholars and contribute to their work by contextualizing the platform in Japan’s media mix and including further reflections on ethnographic research in/of Instagram.

Curation, Filtration, and Participation: Instagram’s Media Ideologies and Affordances

Instagram is a photo and video sharing application (“app”) owned by Facebook Inc. The app is free to download and is currently available for iPhone and Android devices. Users, who must be age 13 and older, are able to upload photos and videos and share them with “followers.” These followers may be acquaintances whom the user knows offline, though may also be other users who share similar interests. User practices on Instagram entail viewing, “liking,” and commenting on content uploaded by other users. Corporate brands and small businesses also bear a presence on the platform, which also facilitates the browsing and purchasing of items on the app.

⁷ See their informative and comprehensive book-length examination of Instagram, titled: *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*.

Instagram's self-marketing on Apple's App Store centers on affective themes of building connections and expressing one's self.⁸ The app description is as follows:

Bringing you closer to the people and things you love. — Instagram from Facebook

Connect with friends, share what you're up to, or see what's new from others all over the world. Explore our community where you can feel free to be yourself and share everything from your daily moments to life's highlights.

Express Yourself and Connect With Friends

- * Add photos and videos to your story that disappear after 24 hours, and bring them to life with fun creative tools.
- * Message your friends with Messenger. Share and connect over what you see on Feed and Stories.
- * Create and discover short, entertaining videos on Instagram with Reels.
- * Post photos and videos to your feed that you want to show on your profile.

Learn More About Your Interests

- * Check out IGTV for longer videos from your favorite creators.
 - * Get inspired by photos and videos from new accounts in Explore.
 - * Discover brands and small businesses, and shop products that are relevant to your personal style.
- Some Instagram features may not be available in your country or region.
(Instagram, Inc. 2021)

As demonstrated from this marketing, Instagram brands itself as a platform that fosters “closeness” with individuals and passions, transcends spatial-temporal borders through the perusal of content from all around the world at any given time, and builds interest-based communities that encourage free expression. These goals of the platform are made possible by specific affordances, such as the ephemeral “Stories” function, the presence of multiple edit and filter options, direct messaging, and the creation of short videos (or “Reels”). As evident by

⁸ The following description of Instagram on Apple's App Store was retrieved on May 17th, 2021, via the following link: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/instagram/id389801252>. The Japanese version of this same description, which is a direct translation of the English original, can be accessed via the following link: <https://apps.apple.com/jp/app/instagram/id389801252>. Particular terms of interest in the original Japanese are *jibunrashiku* (自分らしく; as oneself) and *jibun jishin* (自分自身; oneself). These terms are relevant to questions regarding the representation of the (in)authentic self on the platform.

Instagram's own description of its affordances, users are also able to access content related to their own interests through functions such as the "Explore" page, which utilizes an algorithm based on the user's own habits of interaction to suggest videos and posts that may pique the user's interest.

Instagram originated in the United States. However, in the documentary series *Abstract: The Art of Design*, Ian Spalter, former Head of Design at Instagram, speaks of his first encounter with Japan as a source of inspiration. As images of Japanese stationery stores flicker across the screen, viewers listen as Spalter highlights what he perceived to be a high degree of attention to detail in Japan:

"I actually went to Japan the first time with a research trip and I was like, 'Uh, what is this?' When you think about the things we value, the Instagram design team, and things I value personally...around attention to detail and craft, there's probably very few cultures that hold that up as high as Japanese culture. It's a place where all the details kind of just tickle you. Everything feels pretty considered. And you're just soaking all that in. So, it's stimulating in a different way." (26:43-27:15)

Spalter eventually decided to move to Japan and is currently Head of Instagram Japan. Within his feature episode, a team member of Instagram Japan observes that while "selfies" and text posts are common among Instagram users in the United States, users of Instagram in Japan do not share selfies as frequently and demonstrate cultural differences in sharing patterns (35:33-35:49). Spalter raises a question with regards to Instagram's role in Japan's smartphone ecology: "It's a product that people use all the time. So, how does it fit in with the mix of other applications that they may have on their device?" (35:50-35:56). Spalter's discussion of the connection between attention to detail in Japan and his own career ambitions as Head of Design at Instagram is key. His comments highlight a necessity to examine how global platforms are localized in various contexts and become integrated in a larger network of imagined affordances and media ideologies.⁹ One can note, for example, linguistic nuances that exist in the Japanese

⁹ As I have emphasized in the introduction of this dissertation, this emphasis on localization is not intended to exemplify "uniqueness" or engage in a project of othering. Rather, a focus on localization

localization of Instagram. The “like” button is localized as *ii ne* (いいね), which translates roughly to “How nice!”. User narrations, too, are essential tools in understanding localization.

Instagram was narrated by interlocutors as the most popular SNS in Japan at the time of my fieldwork.¹⁰ Recall Haribo’s narration of Instagram in the introduction of this dissertation as a platform to have fun by browsing images (*gazō de tanoshimu*). Conversations with interlocutors revealed that the popularity of Instagram is attributed to its role in allowing users to stay in touch with friends, view their daily updates, and “follow” accounts that embody users’ shared interests and hobbies. Recall that Takenori, a university student, mentioned that while LINE is currently the main source of communication in Japan, Instagram is understood as a more casual communication tool. According to Takenori, there is an unspoken pressure or obligation to message individuals on LINE upon receiving their contact information; however, such a pressure to directly message individuals is not felt when using Instagram. He ranked the exchange of contact information among youth from most formal to most casual: mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses, LINE accounts, and Instagram accounts. We thus see that Instagram is now part of a media ideology centering on perceived formality of communication. This underscores the assertion made by Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020) regarding the necessity to understand Instagram as a “conduit for *communication* in the increasingly vast landscape for visual social media cultures” (1). While I agree with this assertion, I wish to emphasize that Instagram—and SNS on a broader scale—are also conduits for miscommunication, misinformation, disinformation, and surveillance.

highlights important nuances in usage, how platforms can be used in diverse and even subversive ways unimagined by the platforms’ corporate creators.

¹⁰ Instagram bore its own image and brand as a visual, “fun” platform. Interestingly, multiple interlocutors were unaware that the app is owned by Facebook, which has a negative reputation in Japan due to media coverage of the corporation’s role in privacy and data breaches in the United States (particularly in the context of the 2016 Presidential Election). This perception of Instagram as a stand-alone app demonstrates how different media ideologies and imagined affordances become imbued in the imagination of the platform, to the extent that its potentially controversial aspects are either unknown, hidden, or ignored altogether.

My conversations with interlocutors revealed that Instagram provides users with the ability to stay attuned with their hobbies and interests, and even the opportunity to connect with others users who share similar affinities. Riko, a university student, spoke extensively of her use of Instagram in exploring her interest in architecture and home design. This exploration involved following the #industrial on Instagram and utilizing the bookmark affordance to save posts that served as inspiration in designing her own room. Along with the pursuit of interests and hobbies, Instagram grants users a degree of self-expression and creativity—or as Grace stated, the ability to “broadcast yourself” (*jibun o hasshin suru*). In this vein, it is not uncommon to have multiple accounts to show different content or “selves” to different audiences. Himawari, a third-year high school student, mentioned that high school girls can typically have up to ten Instagram accounts.

When describing the creation and use of multiple accounts, interlocutors such as Himawari used the categorization of “real” or “main” account (*hon aka*; 本垢) and “sub” accounts (*sabu aka*; サブ垢).¹¹ In discussions of the dichotomy of *hon aka* and *sabu aka*, the latter was often characterized as more “private” while the former was characterized as curated and public facing. *Sabu aka* are sometimes devoted to a more intimate circle of acquaintances; furthermore, they were also narrated as often centering on certain hobbies or interests. Himawari explained that she personally uses one *hon aka* and three *sabu aka*. These *sabu aka* included an account devoted to content featuring her dog, an account devoted to images of her stuffed animals, and a private “test” (*tameshi*) account. This *tameshi* account, she explained, was used to experiment with potential designs that she could incorporate into her *hon aka*. Such designs served the aim of ensuring that her *hon aka* did not seem too “all over the place” (*gocha gocha*). At the time of our first conversation, Himawari was experimenting with color coordination. Himawari explained that *tameshi* accounts were commonplace among Instagram users engaged

¹¹ A third categorization also existed, that of *ura aka* (裏垢; secret account). While this seems similar to *sabu aka* in that both types of accounts can be private or “secret,” *ura aka* are most often associated with cyberbullying. Interlocutors made sure to highlight this distinction in our interviews and/or conversations. See Chapter 4 for a deeper discussion of anonymity and cyberbullying.

with a trend at the time known as *keitō* (系統), which centers on curation, color coordination, and sleek design.

Vibrant visuality is yet another reason for Instagram's popularity. Most importantly, Instagram's affordances of hashtags and the search bar are becoming a source of information for users, as users can search for trends, potential places to visit, and the like. Marketing specialist Amano Akira suggests that this tendency of searching for information via hashtags is displacing the practice of searching for information on search engines such as Google, or a shift from "googling" (*guguru*; ググる) to "tagging" (*taguru*; タグる) (Amano 2020). This shift towards Instagram as a source of information can be attributed to a sense of trust in user-made content. When users visit a location, take photos, and document their experiences either in real-time or after-the-fact, other users may view such documentation as more "authentic" or trustworthy than mainstream corporate marketing of that same location. The framing of these locations by user is of interest. This authenticity can be brought into question, however, especially given dynamics of filtration and selective documentation. This is especially brought into question with regards to the *instabae*, or Instagenic, boom.

Aesthetic as Lens: Instabae as Photographic Practice

A discussion of Instagram usage in Japan would be impossible without an examination of *instabae* (インスタ映え). Possible English equivalents of this term are "Instagenic" or "Instaworthy." However, a more accurate translation of *instabae* would be "Insta-shining," as the term is a combination of "Insta" (インスタ) and "to shine" (*haeru*; 映える). As the translation suggests, *instabae* refers to aesthetically pleasing scenes, objects, or sites that are deemed worthy to photograph and upload onto Instagram. A linguistic cousin of *instabae* is *SNSbae*, which is utilized to expand the digital landscape beyond Instagram. An online search of *instabae* hints at the nature of the visuality. Within a simple Google Image search, *instabae* is represented by images of pastel-colored objects and places (Figure 1.3). Such images also involve the presence

of the smartphone. Suggested search categories that appear on the page's header include: Hawaii, tourist spots, New York, photogenic, and sweets. A search of *#instabae* on Instagram itself yields images of delectable sweets and young women posing in front of picturesque locations or food (Figure 1.4). As outlined in Figure 1.5, other popular *instabae* related tags that appear within Instagram's search function include *#Instabae supotto* (Instagenic spots), *#Instabae kafe* (Instagenic café), and *#Instabae ryōri* (Instagenic cooking).

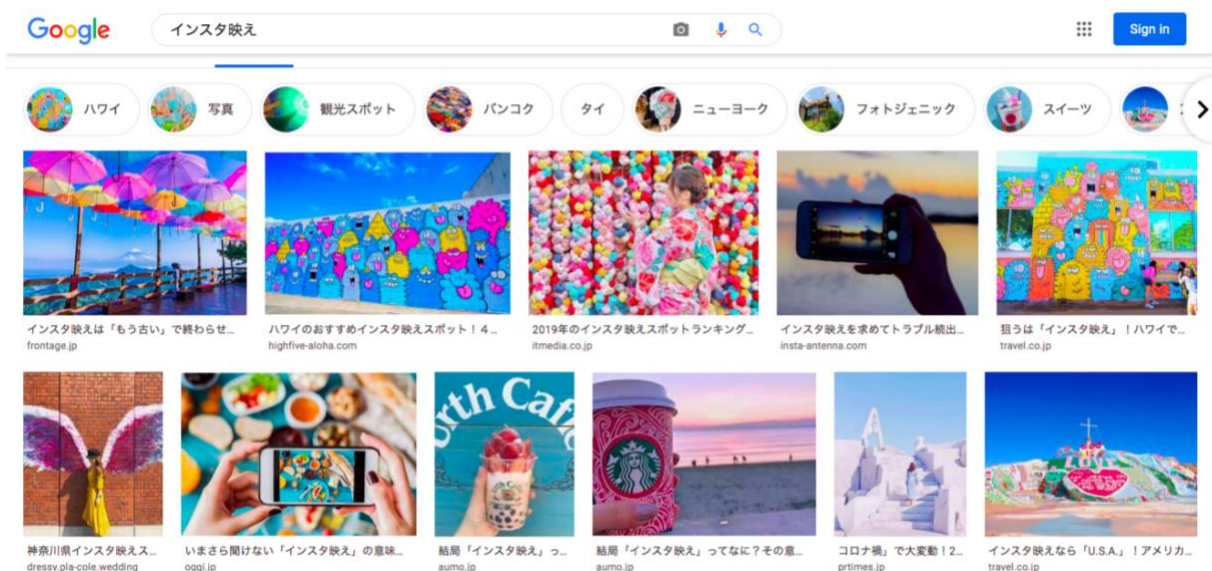


Figure 1.3: Google Image search of *instabae*. Note the suggested tags in the header. Screenshot taken on April 19th, 2021.

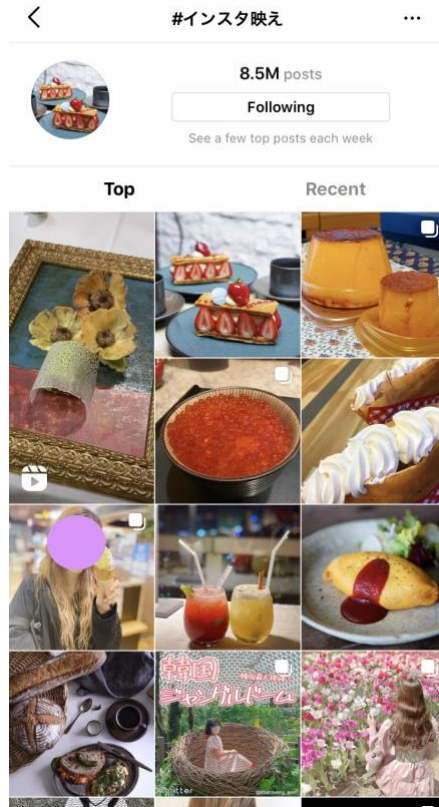


Figure 1.4: Search of #instabae on Instagram. Screenshot taken on April 19th, 2021.

Tag	Romaji and Translation	Quantity of Posts
#インスタ映え	#Instabae (Instagenic)	8.5M
#インスタ映えスポット	#Instabae supotto (Instagenic spots)	277K
#インスタ映えスイーツ	#Instabae suītsu (Instagenic sweets)	109K
#インスタ映えカフェ	#Instabae kafe (Instagenic café)	55.7K
#インスタ映え料理	#Instabae ryōri (Instagenic cooking)	17.9K

Figure 1.5: Suggested *instabae*-related tags on Instagram. Quantity of posts as of April 19th, 2021.

While we see that *instabae* images bear similar themes of pastel hues and sweetness—in terms of actual sweets and the overall affect of the image—the qualifiers that determine what is or is not *instabae* are subjective. When interviewing and conversing with youth about a possible definition of *instabae*, there was a consensus that there is no “definition” per se. In other words, the labelling of an object or space as *instabae* depends on the gaze of the user. Interlocutors did, however, offer their own definitions, frequently invoking adjectives such as “beautiful,” “colorful,” and *kawaii* (cute). Manatsu, a *shakaijin*, linked *instabae* to delicious foods, beautiful places, and colorful places. “Beautiful murals are in now,” Manatsu commented, as she showed me several photos on Instagram of individuals posing in front of colorful murals. Similarly, Riko linked *instabae* to colorful imagery. Riko explained that to make her photos appear *instabae*, she uses a separate app called “Prisma” to brighten her photos. At times, *instabae* was also tied to a specific location, such as Tokyo.

Instabae and its affiliated photographic practices coalesce with studies of the *keitai* camera. Such studies have discussed the rapid integration and development of camera phone technology in Japan vis-à-vis other countries and the centrality of *keitai* photography to youth sociality (Kato et. al 2005; Okada 2005; Foster 2009; Jamieson and Boase 2015). In discussing *instabae* and photographic practices in Reiwa Japan, we must consider the boosted capabilities of the mobile phone camera. Indeed, Takashi, a university student, postulated that the increase in the quality of camera phones might be the reason behind the *instabae* boom. We see a shift from *keitai* photographic practices to “iphoneography” (Halpern and Humphreys 2016). Gómez Cruz and Meyer (2012) note that what is understood as “photography” changes based on time and context, and this understanding is often impacted by “changes in technology, professional practices, and public uses” (208). Photography, they propose, can be understood as a socio-technical network, or “the agency that takes place when a set of technologies, meanings, uses, and practices align” (204). Gómez Cruz and Meyer divide the history of photography into four major “moments” and propose that the smartphone—specifically the Apple iPhone—may mark the emergence of a fifth moment. They state:

The iPhone acts more as a platform and a node for different networks than as a single device. Like a chameleon, an iPhone camera can emulate or simulate a black and white camera, different kinds of Lomo, a pinhole camera, and many others using software. It serves as a platform between companies developing applications and users of them, and, even more, it is a social tool based on image sharing and showing, making computer-mediated social interactions more visual every day. Therefore, we suggest that we are witnessing a generalized fifth moment of photography, that of complete mobility, ubiquity, and connection. (217)

Several years have passed since the publication of Gómez Cruz and Meyer's article, and it is apparent that photography has entered a sort of fifth moment. The networked and connective capabilities of smartphones have been amplified by 5G technology. Instagram and its associated practices are excellent fodder for analyses centering on the assemblages that are characteristic of this fifth moment.

Instabae is more than a visual representation. Instagram—and perhaps by extension, the smartphone camera—has become a *lens* for how to view one's own surroundings. *Instabae*'s focus on the picturesque combined with the actual filtering affordances provided by Instagram ultimately “changes the politics of seeing the banality of images of everyday life” (Gómez and Cruz 2012, 216). The experience of *being* becomes strategized as an experience of documenting and being documented on the basis of aesthetic. During my visits to bookstores in the Tokyo metropolitan area, I noticed myriad guidebooks on how to take photographs during the smartphone or SNS age.¹² While these guidebooks emphasized aesthetic, there was also an underlying discussion of documentation as sharing. As these magazines highlight Instagram, it is worthy to note that Instagram itself may be viewed as a sort of magazine. This was echoed by Manatsu, who likened perusing Instagram to sifting through a picture book. Instagram is thus an extension or digital iteration of print media. We may consider how Instagram and vibrant visuality fits within the history of print media, leisure, and mass culture in Japan—and especially

¹² Examples of such guidebooks included Shōji Toshio's *Take More Beautiful Photographs! The Tricks and Cheats of Taking Travel Photographs on a Smartphone* (*Motto kirei ni toreru! Sumaho de ryokō shashin kotsu to urawaza*) and XICO's *The Photographer's Guidebook for the Age of SNS* (*SNS jidai no fotogurafā gaidobukku*).

its media mix. Instagram's use of *moving* images—in other words, videos—is also of interest. The temporality of Instagram's videos ranges from the ephemerality of “Stories” to the episode-length broadcasts of “IGTV.” Instagram thus combines the elements of television, short films, documentary, and video archive.¹³

An examination of Instagram and vibrant visuality necessitates engagement with several terminologies and concepts in media theory that address the intricate relationships between human-consumers, media platforms, software, hardware, and context. These terminologies and concepts include, but are not limited to: media convergence, media ecologies, platformativity, and media mix.

Vibrant Visuality, Media Convergence, and Media Mix

In his foundational work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2006, 2). Jenkins argues that convergence is a *process* rather than an end point that involves complex interactions between “old” and “new” media (Jenkins 2006, 6-16). Interestingly, Jenkins frames Itō's work on the centrality of mobile phones to youth sociality and intimacy in Japan as a “snapshot of the future” (Jenkins 2006, 17; Steinberg 2012, viii). This harkens to Japan's status as a technological pioneer in mobile communications in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mobile phones, and smartphones in particular, have now become central to media convergence in various geographic, societal, and social contexts. Although mobile phones and digital technologies are constantly evolving, there are still patterns of usage that are consistent

¹³ Fully representing these moving images in a textual mode is difficult. In this dissertation, I rely on thick descriptions of videos. My future goal is to develop a website that will serve as a visual companion for this manuscript, featuring the following: a collection of photos, videos, and screenshots related to vignettes and case studies in each chapter, an archive of significant tweets collected during my fieldwork, and materials submitted by my interlocutors.

between “older” and “newer” iterations of these devices.¹⁴ It is productive to consider both change *and* continuity in media convergence, along with phenomena of media convergence in various contexts.

In their introduction to *Media Convergence in Japan*, Galbraith and Karlin (2016) build upon Jenkins’ work by suggesting that with convergence comes divergence:

Despite the inexorable process of globalization, national contexts – localized, linguistically, legally bounded systems – still matter in the production, circulation and reception of media. It follows that convergence occurs in different ways in different national contexts, which is to say that in discussions of convergence in context we need to pay attention to divergence. (12)

Galbraith and Karlin point out that Jenkins is speaking from a U.S.-context. A discussion about media convergence in Japan and other localized contexts is thus a form of divergence.¹⁵ With regards to divergence, Galbraith and Karlin largely refer to Japan’s focus on its domestic market rather than global expansion of products. Galbraith and Karlin note the example of *keitai* in the late 1990s, particularly their assemblage of mobile Internet, digital cameras, and wallets, and highlight that these devices could not function outside of Japan (14-15). Drawing upon Kushida (2011; 2012), Galbraith and Karlin note that the mobile phone market of the 90s was divergent in that “Japanese providers had the infrastructure to serve a domestic market so robust that they did not need to expand overseas; at the same time, the highly specialized and integrated system made it hard for providers from outside of Japan to break into the market” (15). Here, it is important to recall that the *keitai* of the 90s are called *garakei*. This term now encompasses all flip phones regardless of temporal context, but it is worth recalling that the *gara* in *garakei* refers to the Galapagos Islands—the site of Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution, natural selection, and

¹⁴ In this regard, “new” media is not entirely “new.” As Chun (2016) suggests, a point of interest in analyses of media should not be the “newness” of media, but rather how these media become “habitual” and embedded in the rhythms of everyday life. I explore the “newness” of mediatic assemblages in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ Although here, I would like to caution about the use of the terms divergence and divergent. Such terms bear the air of deviation, of being measured against a certain model. In many cases, the U.S. is held as the default standard or measure. We should consider how the U.S.-context is a form of divergence; in other words, we should problematize the U.S. as the default.

adaptation. This, as Galbraith and Karlin note, points at *keitai* as emerging in the context of a specific domestic market (15).

Taffel (2019) offers a thorough examination of the origin points of the term media ecology, which are rooted in the works of scholars such as McLuhan and Deleuze and Guattari. Taffel explains the different ways in which the term “media ecology” has been used and applied—for example, in the likening of digital technocultural systems to natural ecosystems, or in discussions of human engagements with media and the implications of these engagements (3-6). For Taffel, ecology is a useful term in discussing digital media precisely because digital media itself are dynamic and adaptive (not unlike ecosystems), are rapidly evolving, and have become increasingly collaborative in nature (6).¹⁶ The term entanglement is also core to Taffel’s argument. Taffel suggests that the appeal of this term is its illustration of a continuous enmeshment, rather than an emphasis on individual components. Through the use of the terms ecology and entanglement, Taffel ultimately seeks to do away with traditional dualisms such as nature/culture and human/nonhuman (8). Taffel makes an important point: “culture is always and has always been entangled with nonhuman technological systems” (3). However, Taffel does not offer a deep discussion of the nature of these “systems,” particularly with regards to temporality, adaptation, change, and context.

Taffel analyzes digital entanglements through the relational scales of content, software, and hardware. These three scales involve both the human and nonhuman, although this dichotomy is problematized. Taffel characterizes content as the encounters between users and digital media; this media assemblage is “most visible because it is designed to be experienced by humans” (13). Software or code is a scale embodied by “encounters between humans and

¹⁶ Taffel also highlights the political dimension of the term “ecology”. Taffel’s analysis of digital media ecologies is rooted in the contexts of the Anthropocene and the rapid evolution of information and communications technology—including the myriad forms of capitalism that result (15). I briefly discuss the relationship between capitalism and Instagram in Chapter 2, although an analysis of the relationship between the digital entanglements of Instagram and the Anthropocene is outside of the scope of this dissertation.

machines,” most notably involving algorithms. Finally, hardware is a scale of materiality, as it features “the material assemblages of silicon, copper, plastic and countless other substances that afford the construction of code and content” (14). Taffel adds that the infrastructures that mediate these scales—code, cabling, cell towers, and the like—must also be considered in entanglements (16). An exploration of these scales in the context of the digital entanglements in/of Instagram could include but are not limited to the content produced by users, the coding of the app itself (such as the algorithms that “suggest” potential content of interest), and the hardware of the smartphone by which the platform is accessed. With regards to hardware, the built-in camera of the smartphone is a critical component of the material assemblage.

While Taffel’s framework motivates a consideration of the array of relations and mediations that characterize digital technologies, its weakness lies in its very mode of categorization. The scales of content, software, and hardware are interdependent, and will become increasingly so as digital technologies continue to evolve. My fieldwork demonstrated that the software of SNS has become inextricable to the hardware of the smartphone, to the extent that the software/hardware dichotomy was collapsed. The term “content” has become—and will continue to become—convoluted. In the case of SNS, the term carries debates and questions related to, but not limited to compensation, creativity, consumerism, privacy, surveillance, and misinformation. Taffel’s framework may best be used by scholars as a preliminary means of mapping the scope of their inquiry—after determining the scope, scholars will need to do the additional work of creating more specific language(s) for content, software, and/or hardware. Chow’s (2012) discussion of entanglement is more fluid than the definition offered by Taffel and discusses the significance of context. Chow defines entanglement as:

The sense of a contemporary horizon in which relationships among things, among things and humans, and among different media have become increasingly an issue, in part because of the steady relativization, in modernity, of once-presumed stable categories of origination and causation such as author, owner, actor, mind, intention, and motive. (10)

Chow draws attention to the “fuzzing-up” of categories and epistemic borders, along with the compounding of notions of “agency” in the digital age (10). Here, I wish to add that future inquiries of entanglement may also necessitate an examination of virtuality and “presence,” especially as VR technologies become increasingly integrated into media ecologies.

Lamarre (2017) highlights the importance of analyzing media technologies through various scales and layers of relations and infrastructures, introducing “platformativity” as a potential approach.¹⁷ Lamarre describes platformativity as a framework that addresses “the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and collective—a kind of performativity via platforms” (301). Lamarre draws upon the case study of the parasociality mediated by *mukbang* (eating broadcasting) on Korean streaming services to illustrate how platformativity as a framework grants insight into the affective and layered intricacies of platform-human relations:

In effect, technical individual (platform), human individual (users, viewers, consumers), and screen life (characters or personages) are situated at the same level in ontological terms, mutually captured and capturing, infra-individually. What initially seems to be an opposition between the domestic and the exotic, between the familiar and the strange, turns out to be an oscillation between the intimate and the disparate, in which the disparate inhabits intimacy. (302)

Platformativity, as a framework centering on platform-human relations, is a contribution to media convergence theory. Recent studies of media convergence in/of Japan have centered on the phenomenon of “media mix,” or “the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises” (Steinberg 2012, viii).

In his groundbreaking work on this concept, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, Steinberg presents a history of media mix with a focus on Japanese television animation, or anime. Steinberg situates anime “in the context of media transformations (the systematization of the media mix); cultural shifts (the rise of post-Fordist capitalism and its

¹⁷ Lamarre’s proposal of platformativity as a potential frame of analysis is contextualized in the impasses found within area studies and media studies, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation: the obscuring of individuation and the treatment of areas as supplements for media and technologies.

consumer culture); and the continuous, serial consumption of transmedia worlds” (xvi).

Steinberg argues that the emergence of anime “as a system of interconnected media and commodity forms” in the 1960s would inspire the development of media mix itself. In this regard, analyses of media mix cannot be separated from anime (viii).

Scholars have situated media mix within convergence discourse. Galbraith and Karlin argue that media mix has more to do with “the deployment of characters and the economy of affect that exists around them” (17). Furthermore, they explain that while convergence refers to “a coming together of two or more things,” media mix refers to “a system of media and commodities in relation to one another” (22). Lamarre explains that the frameworks of media convergence and/or media mix center on the monetization of “the intra-actions between media and platforms,” which rely on “deregulated infrastructures and an incessant production of distributive capacity” (2017, 303). Lamarre proposes his framework of platformativity as a “middle ground” approach as it reconsiders national and regional forms of infrastructure while also interrogating regimes of power (303).

Here, I wish to situate my own examination of *instabae* and the participatory culture of Instagram within media convergence theory in/of Japan, particularly as both relate to media mix. While media mix is frequently associated with anime franchises, I choose to frame *instabae* and Instagram as media mix precisely because the vibrant visuality of the trend and platform itself has become integral to (trans)media marketing, storytelling, and practices across various industries and (sub)cultures. For example, as *instabae* becomes a lens for experiencing surroundings, it has subsequently become a central part of *planning* trips and experiences. Tourism agencies in particular have capitalized on this trend, publishing guides and jumpstarting campaigns that center on “photogenic travel.”¹⁸ The intermingling of *instabae* with tourism is

¹⁸ One case study is the Japan Travel Bureau’s (JTB) 2019 magazine, *This Doesn’t Even Look Like Japan! Photogenic Travel (Nihon jyanai mitai! Fotojenikku Travel)*. I address the relationships between tourism, *instabae*, and participatory culture in Chapter 2. *Instabae* is an iteration of long-existing forms of consumerist—and often gendered—play and participation. Furthermore, it constitutes a point within the longer timeline of mass culture in Japan.

reminiscent of Appadurai's relation of mediascape with the creation of idealized worlds. The circulation of aesthetic "idealized" photos within *instabae* culture can cause a blurring of the lines between realistic and fictional landscapes, potentially resulting in the construction of "'imagined worlds' which are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other 'imagined world'" (Appadurai 1990, 299). *Instabae* and Instagram may be characterized as constitutive of media mix in that both have become embedded in sociality and the fabric of everyday life. As Steinberg explains, this embeddedness is a core component of the rise of media mix, as it "coincides with the expansion of the media environment into the lifeworlds of human subjects such that it has become increasingly inseparable from all aspects of contemporary life" (Steinberg 2012, xi).

Here, I wish to propose that space/place and physical landscapes should also be integrated into the mix. Indeed, a discussion of *instabae* as a media mix should not neglect space/place and physical landscapes: the very notion of *instabae* and the practice of participating in its visual culture(s) rely on the transformation of photographic objects and landscapes into vibrant digital representations. In this regard, the photographic objects and landscapes become "remixed."¹⁹ An examination of the relationships between the vibrant visuality of *instabae* and urban ecologies is a valuable contribution to past and ongoing reflections on urbanization and transformation in Japan. Prichard (2019) has examined how urban ecologies have shaped the material and affective landscapes of cultural practice in Japan—this influence has formed the core of critical and visual documentation by filmmakers and photographers such as Tsuchimoto Noriaki and Nakahira Takuma. Coates (2018) and Fisch (2018) have examined the centrality of commuter networks within these urban ecologies and everyday rhythms. A discussion of the relationships between *instabae* and landscapes would also contribute to notable examinations of how space/place is produced and experienced (Bachelard 1964; Lefebvre 1991; Augé 2002; Augé 2008). Finally, in considering *instabae* as a lens for experiencing surroundings, we may

¹⁹ For an interesting discussion of media production, authorship, and "remix," see Cohen 2012.

also consider the relationship(s) between cameras, documentation, and anthropology. In the next section, I address the roles of the smartphone camera, Instagram, space/place, and mobility in ethnographic practice.

Chasing the Shine: Smartphone Cameras and Ethnographic Practice

In discussing the challenges of transferring “traditional” ethnographic methods to digitally mediated social contexts, Markham (2013) offers a set of provocations intended to challenge the traditional assumptions associated with terms related to ethnography, such as “the field” and “participation.” Markham begins with two rather interesting questions: “What if in the early 1900s anthropologists had the Internet?” and “What would Malinowski do?” (437). The myriad questions posed in Markham’s “thought experiment” are helpful in thinking of the (im)possibilities of transferring fieldwork methods typically conducted in physical settings to digital contexts. Of particular interest is Markham’s set of provocations regarding the use of photography by ethnographers:

Why did ethnographers take pictures? Why didn’t they? We might consider how visual materials constitute a form of fieldnote or a practice of observation. Beyond this, what is the role of the visual in digitally-saturated contexts? With the greater capacity for including visualizations, how might we build fieldwork practices that weave this more fully into our inquiry? (442)

Pinney (2011) explains that the appeal of photography to anthropologists in the nineteenth century coincided with the rise of fieldwork as a methodology central to anthropology’s “new vision of itself,” a vision in which anthropologists were tasked with conducting their own research. Photography was recognized by anthropologists for its potentiality as mediator and tool in capturing “reality” and thus yielding reliable, raw data (15). Examinations of the role of photography in anthropology have centered on the politics of representation, dichotomies of the “observer” and the “observed,” and the power dynamics inherent within these dichotomies, most

notably in the context of the historical photographing of Indigenous populations by anthropologists (Ginsburg 2008; Pinney 2011; Tsinhnahjinnie 2003).

The examination of a photographic practice such as *instabae* provides an opportunity to contemplate the historical and ongoing use of cameras in ethnographic documentation. Mead (1995) writes of the promise of emerging technologies in facilitating the documentation and preservation of materials, including a hopeful mention of the possible existence of the 360-degree camera (9). The smartphone itself may be considered to be a powerful ethnographic tool, as it is both “a communication-connection device and an audiovisual production tool” (Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012, 214). Favero and Theunissen (2018) suggest that the growing ubiquity of digital technologies such as smartphones in daily routines and their embeddedness onto the body have blurred the boundaries between fieldwork and everyday life, resulting in “serendipitous ethnography,” or “the capture of significant quantities of material even in the most unexpected, mundane moments” (163). The smartphone and its camera offer ethnographers a degree of mobility that was not provided by the bulky, heavy, and stationary cameras of the past. The utility of the smartphone camera in ethnographic fieldwork can be attributed to its portability. It is lightweight and often high resolution, depending on the phone’s model. The smartphone camera is one part of the smartphone’s assemblage of hardware and software that are also useful for ethnographic documentation, such as built-in microphones and audio recorder applications. The ubiquity of the smartphone in certain field sites also means that ethnographic documentation via the smartphone camera can be discreet—for better or for worse.²⁰

²⁰ Borneman explains that his use of a digital camera throughout his fieldwork in Aleppo, rather than his initial plan to sketch public scenes, mitigated the risk of being erroneously suspected as a CIA agent. Digital cameras, he explains, were “ubiquitous in present-day urban life and unlikely to draw undue attention” (2007, xii). This can be extended to the smartphone camera. Similarly, smartphone cameras are ubiquitous in certain contexts, such as urban Tokyo. With regards to the discreet use of the smartphone camera, it is important to consider ethics and privacy. While in some cases this use can be beneficial for fieldwork, it becomes problematic if subjects are being photographed or documented in an unethical manner. Ethnographers should be cognizant of this and should make a conscious effort to protect the identities of individuals caught within their photographs. Throughout this dissertation, I blur faces of interlocutors or individuals who happened to be in my shot.

Miller et. al (2021) highlight contrasts rather than continuities between early photography and smartphone photography. For example, the authors highlight scale, or “the sheer numbers of images that people take, circulate, exhibit and store,” and storage as significant departures from analogue and digital photography (105). The authors also argue that smartphone photography is characterized by transience which differs from early photography’s emphasis on “long-term storage and the archive” (106).²¹ The “Perpetual Opportunism” afforded by the smartphone is the ultimate driver of the contrasts between early photography and smartphone photography. Miller et. al explain this term, as they state:

Simply because the smartphone is always with us, it creates the possibility of being opportunistic as a constant. But what matters is the evidence that this possibility is appreciated by users, who in turn develop a more opportunistic attitude to their everyday lives. (104)

With regards to smartphone photography, Miller et. al contextualize Perpetual Opportunism as the “ever-present possibility of taking and then instantly sharing a picture” (104). The authors explain that the decision to take a photograph at certain moments vis-à-vis other moments constitutes a form of framing, marking the photographed object as “something transcendent of the mundane” (108). This framing is evident in the very notion and practice of *instabae*, as smartphone users aim to capture picturesque moments and places—the nature of which is not unlike a “frameable” work of art.

The focus on contrast rather than continuity is a contribution made by Miller et. al, yet can also be reductive. It is important to map continuity, especially since there are continuities between the early photography of ethnographers and the smartphone photography of contemporary ethnography. Waltrip (2021) extends Haraway’s discussion of optics and the cyborg to suggest that similarly “the smartphone and its image-making and -sharing technology afford knowing and sensing together in new ways” (141). Ethnographers who wield

²¹ While transience has become a key feature of smartphone photography, as evident in the limited temporality of Instagram Stories, it is reductive to limit smartphone photography to such a temporality. Smartphone photography can constitute an archive in its own right.

smartphones, a “prosthetic device,” may thus be considered cyborgs, too. Drawing on ethnographic filmmakers such as Rouch, Waltrip also highlights the generative potential of cameras and images: “We often look without seeing, and the camera and images can help us” (141). According to Waltrip, the camera introduces ethnographers to “unconscious optics” (141). The role of the camera in allowing ethnographers to see what they could not have at the time and the insight provided by the resulting image are core themes in discussions of the historical role of the camera in anthropology.

My own examination of Instagram centers on its potential as a simultaneous “field site” and means of ethnographic documentation. In the realm of digital studies, textual platforms such as Twitter have dominated the limelight due to the accessible means of examining these platforms through analytical tools such as Twitter’s Application Programming Interfaces (API). These analytic tools allow researchers to conduct quantitative and thematic analyses of user-generated textual data on a massive scale. Photos and videos, however, cannot easily be analyzed on a similar massive, quantitative scale. Nevertheless, in recent years several scholars have intervened in digital studies by highlighting the promise of visual-centric platforms, offering preliminary examinations of methodologies and analytic strategies that are conducive to visual platforms such as Instagram. These scholars have argued that studies on Instagram should integrate an understanding and examination of themes such as affordances, the place of Instagram in broader media ecologies, aesthetics, and audience usage (Highfield and Leaver 2014; Highfield and Leaver 2016; MacDowall and de Souza 2017).

Other approaches and themes have characterized recent examinations of Instagram. Manovich (2017) examines Instagram as a platform through a combination of approaches in media theory, art history, and data analysis, incorporating computational analysis datasets of 16 million Instagram photos shared in cities and accumulated since 2012. Marwick (2015) utilizes textual and visual analysis of forty public Instagram accounts with over ten thousand followers each to examine microcelebrity and Instagram as an attention economy. In her extensive scholarship, Abidin utilizes ethnographic approaches to examine microcelebrity—or more

specifically, influencer culture—in and of Instagram (Abidin 2014; 2016; 2018; 2020). Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) utilize a platform biography approach in their groundbreaking examination of Instagram as a platform and culture. Their examination not only includes deep analysis of Instagram’s growth as a platform, but also incorporates ethnographic fieldwork to understand how Instagram culture manifests both online and offline.

Rich ethnographic data and analysis can result from the close tracking of hashtags, the reading of text and image, and the viewing of user-generated videos on Instagram. The wealth of content on the platform, however, means that the ethnographer must deal with an overwhelming amount of data and profiles (Ellison and boyd 2013). Similar to traditional ethnographic methods, the ethnographer should enter the platform first in an exploratory manner, navigating content of interest and growing acquainted with algorithmic flows and trends. Following this exploratory fieldwork, the ethnographer can then select a particular facet of the platform—whether this is a particular set of hashtags, affordances, profiles, trends, or user practices—and engage in deeper and more nuanced examinations. Instagram as a field site also necessitates a navigation of digital ethics, as the “publicness” of the platform itself does not necessarily equal consenting to the ethnographer’s gaze. Many of my interlocutors were rather lax about their profiles; however, some interlocutors bore additional private accounts that they refused to show me. Yet another added layer of complexity is the increasingly public nature of the private. Although a user may set their profile to private and post with the intention of safeguarding their information and profile, there is no way to ensure privacy. Their information and profile, while protected from the gaze of other users, cannot be protected from the surveillance of the corporations that run those platforms and third-parties such as advertising agencies. Platforms such as SNS thus run on a false sense of agency and privacy. Instagram fieldwork can be generative, yet the subjective and evolving parameters of ethics, the public, and the private can be a source of impasse.

As a digital ethnographer, I am interested in the perceived and actual dichotomy of “online” and “offline.” In particular, I am interested in how this dichotomy functions within the

realm of representation: the representation of space/place and the representation of the self. My ethnographic practice as it relates to Instagram straddles the often blurry lines between online and offline. This ethnographic approach, which recognizes that the field is not a bounded space, is reminiscent of what Burrell (2017) characterizes as the “fieldsite as network.” Such a network, Burrell explains, consists of “fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects” (55). Burrell suggests that this approach, in its unboundedness, allows a deeper focus on the phenomenon of study. Burrell states:

By defining the fieldsite as a network...the fieldsite transitions from a bounded space that the researcher dwells within to something that more closely tracks the social phenomenon under study. This site is constructed in terms of how such a phenomenon is perceived and acted on by participants. (58)

My examination of *instabae* would require an examination of its online and offline manifestations, along with users’ engagement with the trend both online and offline. Furthermore, the narrations and imaginations of *instabae* and Instagram on a broader scale among users would yield a robust analysis. After learning of *instabae* as a trend, I conducted exploratory fieldwork by inserting #*instabae* (#インスタ映え) into Instagram’s own search bar. When viewing the image results, I took note of the following: the objects, individuals, and sites represented within the image, positioning of the camera and the image’s subject(s), the presence of any filters or augmentations, and the overall affect of the image. In addition, I also examined the text posted with the image, the hashtags within the post, and any associated locations revealed through the use of geographic tags. By “following” the *instabae* hashtag, Instagram’s algorithm introduced me to associated hashtags. This amplified the exploratory nature of this online fieldwork, as I was able to learn of trends, phrases, and hashtags that existed within the milieu of *instabae*.

Ethnographic research in/of Instagram necessitates actual use of the platform. Furthermore, it involves embodying user practices to better understand interlocutors’ anecdotes, the appeal of the platform, and the hidden labor behind taking, editing, and uploading images.

Prior to my fieldwork, I had used Instagram for personal purposes: to document my own personal life milestones, upload mundane images of the everyday, entertain myself by viewing images and videos posted by acquaintances and celebrities, and stay in touch with acquaintances. For my *instabae* fieldwork, I ultimately decided to create a separate Instagram account for the sole purpose of the fieldwork, @kimstagram_travels. This decision was largely motivated by my desire to focus solely on *instabae*. Not only would the use of my personal account be distracting, but using an account dedicated specifically to *instabae* and Japanese-language accounts and trends meant that Instagram's algorithm would work in my favor in suggesting relevant Japanese-language hashtags and accounts to follow. Furthermore, @kimstagram_travels served as a way of staying in touch with those whom I had met in the field.

When creating posts for my fieldwork account, I made an effort to write all text in Japanese.²² I felt uncomfortable with providing my personal account to individuals whom I had just met, as it contained very private details about my life. @kimstagram_travels provided a sense of distance and also protected my own privacy. However, I did exchange my personal account eventually to interlocutors with whom I had grown very close; furthermore, some interlocutors requested that I also exchange my personal account with them after hearing that I had multiple accounts. This request was fair given that I was requesting highly personal information from them as well. At times, I appeared in interlocutors' stories, and was tagged either via my fieldwork account or my personal account. Part of building rapport and connecting with interlocutors involved moments of "sharing"—embodied by the physical sharing of experiences and the actual "sharing" of these experiences as posts on SNS.

As part of the "offline" component of my fieldwork, I visited locations that had been publicized as *instabae*—either on Instagram itself, within magazines, or within online search

²² Creating social media content requires a great deal of labor. I admittedly grew quite tired and was not as active as influencers. Doing this digital labor while exploring offline sites, interviewing interlocutors, messaging interlocutors, visiting bookstores and archives, and conducting media analysis sapped so much energy. So unfortunately, @kimstagram_travels did not have as many published posts as I originally planned.

results. Word-of-mouth (*kuchikomi*) also determined the locations I visited, as interlocutors often spoke of memorable *instabae* spots during their interviews or casual conversations. At the start of my fieldwork, I visited these spots by myself. However, as I will explain below, I realized that several practices associated with *instabae* were very social. I eventually began to invite interlocutors to my field excursions, and at times they also invited me to visit certain sites with them as well. This mutual companionship not only made the field excursion more enjoyable, but it also allowed me to learn more about the interlocutor—and vice versa.

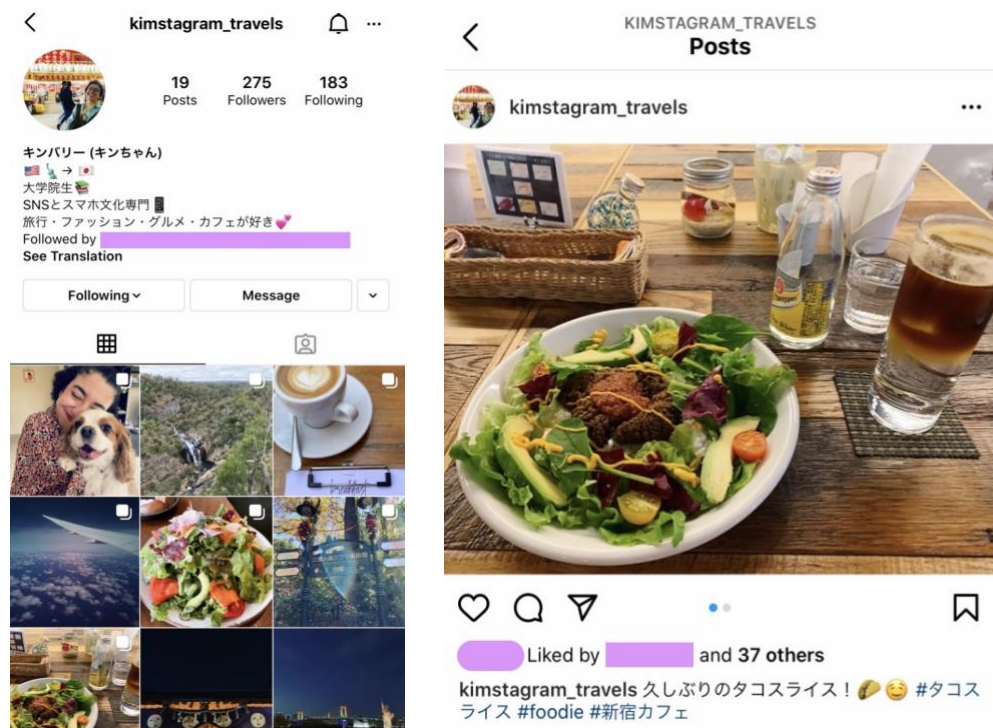


Figure 1.6: Screenshots of @kimstagram_travels account.



Figure 1.7: A stand for cameras at Atami Castle. An indent had been added to the wooden stand in order to accommodate smartphones. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

Chasing the shine of *instabae* involves chasing other sensorial experiences—whether such experiences are tactile, visual, aural, fragrant, or flavorful. Café culture is quite big in Tokyo, so I found myself frequently engaging in the café “pilgrimages” (*meguri*) that were also associated with *instabae*. Such pilgrimages were fully sensorial, though admittedly I was most interested in visuals and flavors. Eating with interlocutors or eating at locations frequented by interlocutors can provide opportunities for reflexive thinking on interlocutors’ own worlds (Pink 2008, 181). When first engaging in *meguri*, I did so alone. After locating field sites online—mostly cafes that had appeared in numerous results under the *instabae* hashtag—I visited these sites in-person. I often found that these cafes were less bustling than I imagined based on the traffic of related images on Instagram.²³ When visiting a London-themed café in Omotesando one afternoon in late August, I was surrounded by mostly women. One woman next to me was wearing headphones and had placed a notebook on the table—she rested her head in her arms,

²³ It is possible that this was connected to when I was visiting these sites. When engaging in *meguri* alone, I typically went in the early afternoon during weekdays. When engaging in *meguri* with interlocutors typically on the weekends, these sites tended to be more crowded. This raises questions regarding the ethnographer not being “bound” by typical work schedules and being able to access sites during “down times.”

and then woke up shortly afterwards. The other women were sitting in pairs, and most of them scrolled on their smartphones while talking to each other. Another woman sat alone, scrolling on her phone. There was at least another woman doing the same. Three men were also seated in the nearby table. One man sat alone working on his laptop, while the other two men pair spoke to each other while scrolling through their phones.

In late August and early September, I visited a café located near Kanda Myōjin Shrine known for its adoption of various themes, usually related to anime. The theme during my visit was *Hamtarō*, a children’s show centering on the adventures of an orange and white hamster. As part of the theme, the café offered parfaits, sandwiches, and lattes resembling Hamtarō or one of his hamster friends. I sat alone and ordered a parfait. When the waitress returned to give me a complimentary coaster, she also brought a rather large Hamtarō plushie nestled in a wooden box (Figure 1.8). She placed it on top of the table before suggesting: “Just in case you want to take a picture!” I was pleased—not only would I be able to take an *instabae* photo for research, but I would not dine alone. When paying for my meal, I thanked the waitress for the temporary plushie companion, as I felt less lonely while eating. I asked if a lot of people came to take pictures, and she responded affirmatively. I mentioned that I was doing research on *instabae*, to which she responded that it was beneficial that she had placed the plushie on the table.



Figure 1.8: An *instabae* moment. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

Although embarking on *meguri* on my own still yielded rich experiences, I observed that it was a very social practice. It was not uncommon to see individuals dining on their own while snapping photos on their smartphone; however, it was more common to see pairs or groups of individuals engaging in this practice. Over time, I began to incorporate *meguri* with my interactions with interlocutors, openly confessing that there were certain cafes that I wished to explore, though not alone. In all instances interlocutors agreed, or they provided recommendations on sites that *they* wished to explore. Lulu was particularly knowledgeable of cafes in Tokyo, and would search for potential food options via the Instagram search option whenever we met. During one outing, Lulu and I met at a cozy café with wood décor. Although the menu was pricier than we anticipated, I enjoyed an iced coffee and crème brûlée, while Lulu enjoyed a latte and a cheesecake. A group of stylish and beautiful women were seated at the table next to ours. I leaned towards Lulu and commented on their aesthetic—could they possibly be models? She replied that she thinks that they are Instagrammers. This made sense, as I overheard them talking about Instagram, frequently commenting *instabae* as they revealed photos on their smartphones.

In another outing, Lulu and I went to a burger joint in Harajuku, near Takeshita Street. We initially struggled with our order because we could not gauge the size of the burgers and did not know if ordering a set would be excessive. We asked the waitress about the “Tom and Jerry burger,” a burger with oozing melted cheese that was one of the joint’s most popular selections. The waitress told us that it is quite voluminous and might be filling. She mentioned that we could cut it in half, but this would ruin the aesthetic.²⁴ According to the waitress, most customers like to order the burger in its whole form so that they could take photos of it. “*Soko made kangaete iru*. They’re even thinking that far ahead,” Lulu muttered under her breath in reverential bewilderment. The waitress’s observation only proved that this burger joint was an *instabae*

²⁴ Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) discuss having a similar experience in Japan during the fieldwork for their platform biography of Instagram (163-68).

location. Lulu and I had known this beforehand, especially since a well-known Instagrammer foodie (*gurume*) had visited the location and provided a stellar review. Once the food arrived, Lulu and I took multiple photos on our phones and on my Polaroid camera. Upon seeing the cheese oozing from the burger, Lulu began to take a video on her phone. She pressed her fork against the top bun, applying pressure to highlight the oozing cheese. Later, I would see that she had posted the video to her Instagram story with the caption “wow,” followed by three clapping hand emoji (Figure 1.9).



Figure 1.9: Photograph of the burger on Lulu’s Instagram Story. Screenshot taken with Lulu’s permission.

Visiting *instabae* spots within and outside of Tokyo that were not related to foodie or café culture yielded different yet interesting experiences. When visiting these locations, I was struck by two observations: the stark differences between how these locations appeared online versus how they actually appeared offline and the frantic desire to take photographs. The first observation is embodied by my visit to La Vita in Jiyugaoka and Mako’s explanation of the disappointing lackluster nature of some *instabae* spots, as explained in the Mediation at the start of this chapter. The experience of encountering this dissonance between online representation

and offline ontology, or what Mako's described as a dichotomy of "shiny" versus "real," was an uncanny one. When visiting these spaces in-person, I felt a strange mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity. I "knew" these spaces due to my online encounter of their images, yet realized that these spaces often contradicted my expectations. My invocation of the descriptor of "uncanny" is intentional, as I believe that the sentiment of (un)familiarity is reminiscent of the dynamics described within Freud's essay of the same name. Freud famously describes the uncanny as he states:

...An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on. (1955[1919], 244)

Freud is referring largely to the grotesque, fiction, the repression of childhood memories, and psychic reality. While the dissonance between online representations of *instabae* spots and their offline ontology is not grotesque per se, I argue that the sentiments of shock, disappointment, or eerie nostalgia that accompany the in-person *encounter* of these spaces harken to the uncanny. Furthermore, visiting *instabae* spots and comparing their offline ontology to their online representation may constitute a form of reality-testing (248). In this case, reality-testing is embodied by the comparison of the imagination and representation of the space vis-à-vis its materiality and ambience. *Instabae* images on Instagram can constitute a form of fiction, and by extension the Instagram user can take on the same power as the storyteller described by Freud—namely, a "directive power" that can guide "the current of our emotions" (251). I suggest that along with emotions, Instagram users can influence other users' expectations of spaces, places, objects, and people.

When visiting *instabae* locations, I observed that there were long lines of individuals waiting to pose in certain areas that had been featured on Instagram (Figures 1.11 and 1.12). The individuals present at these *instabae* locations tended to be young women in their 20s or early 30s. Younger individuals, such as high schoolers, were more present in locations such as tapioca

stands in Harajuku. Many *instabae* locations bore areas and objects that seemed to be intentionally curated for the purpose of aesthetic, perhaps for the sake of documentation. Many of these locations had stands upon which to rest cameras and smartphones (Figures 1.7 and 1.10). Observing these spaces brought about a sort of chicken and egg question: were these spaces cultivated *specifically* for *instabae* culture, or did these spaces already exist independently as aesthetic marvels discovered by Instagrammers afterwards?²⁵ These musings were complemented by ethnographic observation of and participation in the process of taking aesthetic photos. At the Akao Herb and Rose Garden in Atami, Shizuoka Prefecture, there was a long line of visitors waiting to take a photo on a swing set overlooking the coast (Figure 1.11). The process of taking photos was a social one—not only due to the logistics of needing another individual to *take* the scenic photo, but also due to the mutual support that had been taking place. It seemed that poses were either pre-determined or decided on the spot. As I stood in line and observed the process of other photo-goers, I overheard exchanges of pose guidance and exclamations of support and affirmation when the ideal or intended aesthetic was achieved. The comradery brought a smile to my own face.

I found that I, too, needed support in order to fully participate in this process of photo-taking. For this specific excursion, I asked a friend to accompany me to the site and take photos on my behalf. Thus, I found myself engaging in this very social practice. The process of waiting in line, deciding upon poses or drawing upon the creative poses of other participants, and smiling awkwardly at the camera or opting towards a more “candid” shot allowed me to feel a sort of connection with the other individuals in the space. We were all there to be present in the space and document our encounter. The process of photo-taking can be an awkward one, but the comradery within the space presented an aura of encouraged trial-and-error. It was a set of individual photoshoots in a shared space that also involved collaboration. When noticing a couple shyly wondering if they should ask for someone to take their photo at a bench in the

²⁵ I discuss the influence of tourism campaigns in Chapter 2.

shape of a makeshift house overlooking the sea, I offered to take one. I asked for their preference in terms of vertical or landscape. I counted down and began to take numerous photos, as the couple transitioned from pose to pose. I made sure to adjust the brightness to capture the hue of the ocean while also capturing their smiling faces. Once I took the photos, I complimented the aesthetic of the background coupled with their pose. The woman smiled, and eagerly swiped through the photos I had taken. The woman also took photos of me and my friend in return, harkening to a sort of exchange relationship within the space.

Engaging with *instabae* locations as both participant and observer provides some chance for encounter via the exchange relationship of taking photos. The nature of these locations—spaces of leisure, documentation, and enthusiastic comradery—marked the possibility of research-related conversations out of the question. When attempting to spark conversation with visitors as to why they came to the garden and how they discovered the location, I received brief remarks before the visitors walked to the next photo location. It is jarring to be approached by a stranger, and a foreigner nonetheless, when simply trying to enjoy a moment or experience with friends. Thus, I determined that it would be best to observe and participate on my own through taking aesthetic shots. The chance for engagement would occur with interlocutors with whom I developed rapport.²⁶

²⁶ For an example of outings with interlocutors, refer to the Mediations at the start and end of this chapter.



Figure 1.10: Photographic spot in the Akao Herb and Rose Garden. Note the camera stand on the far left. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.



Figure 1.11: Moments of waiting and participating. Photographs taken by the author and an acquaintance in 2019.



Figure 1.12: A line outside of a popular *instabae* café. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

Participating in *instabae* culture as an ethnographer required reflexivity and an imagining of the self as consumer. When visiting *instabae* cafes, for example, I had to be intentional with my orders by considering which items on the menu were most popular or “aesthetic” according to *instabae* standards. Often, this meant selecting items that I would not normally choose outside of the context of fieldwork. Doing this fieldwork also meant confronting the complex and often awkward process of taking photos alone. When taking photos of the establishment or food items, I also had to be mindful of privacy, being careful not to feature patrons’ faces. On several occasions, I spoke with managers and employees at these establishments about customer demographics, business social media practices, and attitudes towards customer engagement on social media. Such conversations, however, were often brief due to the busyness of the workday. The manager of a café in Jiyugaoka, famous for its New York style bagels and bodega aesthetic, generously sat down with me after cleaning multiple tables and ringing up customers at the register. As I recognized the inconvenience of these conversations to employees over time, my ethnographic participation in *instabae* establishments transitioned to only experiencing the space as a consumer. Throughout this participant observation, more complex themes became evident, such as the economic, social, and gendered dynamics of *instabae*.

My approach to ethnographic research in/of Instagram can best be described as multimodal. Collins, Durington, and Gill (2017) define multimodality as the following:

Multimodality describes the arc of anthropological media through contemporary society. It evokes the heterogeneities of anthropological research across multiple platforms and collaborative sites, including film, photography, dialogue, social media, kinesis, and practice. At its core, multimodal anthropology acknowledges the centrality of media production to the everyday life of both anthropologists and our interlocutors. It demands that we reflect on this multiplicity while working to engage and collaborate along media forms our interlocutors find relevant to their lives. (142)

Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón (2019) also suggest that multimodality “offers a line of flight for an anthropology yet to come: multisensorial rather than text based, performative rather than representational, and inventive rather than descriptive” (220). Such an emphasis on the sensorial is in line with growing scholarship on sensory ethnography (Pink 2009; Chenhall, Kohn, and Stevens 2020). Finally, multimodal anthropology can also refer to the “afterlife of anthropologically intended media,” specifically with regards to public scholarship and accessible, open-access dissemination (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017, 142).

Much like interdisciplinarity, multimodality has become the new normal of research, anthropological and otherwise. In the context of my research, multimodality is embodied by my transmedia approach. My ethnographic approach is multimodal in that it traverses the spaces of the physical and the digital, offline and online. My ethnographic process, particularly as it relates to Instagram, decenters the textual to focus on the visual and sensorial. This focus on the visual is evident in my use of “iphoneography” throughout my fieldwork, along with the uploading and sharing of these photographs on SNS. The sensorial is captured via a combination of visuals and thick description.²⁷ The documentation of *instabae* locations highlighted the sometimes visible

²⁷ There are limitations to representations of the sensorial in written text. While I have tried my best to capture the sensorial dimensions of *meguri*, senses such as taste and sound cannot be perfectly encapsulated within textual descriptions. While these limitations may prove frustrating in the writing process, such limitations also provide opportunities for exploration and experimentation. Ethnographers engaging in multimodality, for example, can experiment with soundscapes. For an example of such experimentation, see Chenhall, Kohn, and Stevens (2020), who offer a “sensory ethnographic tour” of

discrepancy between digital representations of spaces and their “actual” physical reality. Such a discrepancy is embodied by the dichotomies of *instabae* and *shoboi/riaru*, a vibrant ideal and a lackluster reality.

As SNS are deeply embedded in the social lives of interlocutors, my relationships with interlocutors occurred in both physical and digital social contexts. With regards to Instagram, interlocutors could follow my excursions via @kimstagram_travels, and those interlocutors with whom I developed deep rapport could view my more personal updates and musings via my private account. I met “in person” with interlocutors frequently, though I also maintained close connection with them via Direct Message on Instagram, messages on LINE, along with voice calls on LINE.

Exploring *instabae* as ethnographer and user is part of the “infrastructures of seeing, thinking, and knowing” that are part of the ethnographic process (Waltorp 2021). Waltrip describes the anthropologist as part of the assemblage of their field site, which includes the digital:

The cosmology, the physical environment, the politics and layers of stories and histories of the place are other elements that make up the assemblage that you interrogate—the infrastructure of seeing, thinking, and knowing in which the digital is an integral part. The ethnographer is always part of this assemblage as it stabilizes momentarily. (148-49)

As the digital is part of the assemblage of the field site, ethnographic research in/of Instagram and *instabae* necessitated participation in both online and offline practices. By participating in *meguri* and photographic practices associated with *instabae*, I sought to understand my interlocutors’ emplacement, along with that of participants in *instabae* culture. Pink (2008) suggests that the ethnographic process is a form of place-making in which ethnographers and interlocutors are co-implicated. Pink encourages ethnographers to think reflexively about their own emplacement in their field site and how they participate in the creation of an ethnographic

Japan via a focus on sonic environments and the everyday. The authors combine text, image, and a digital sonic depository, “[Sonic Japan](#),” to fulfill this ethnographic tour.

“place.” Furthermore, Pink proposes that reflexive thinking on emplacement and the sensorial nature of ethnographic place may allow ethnographers to develop an understanding of interlocutors’ own worlds and emplacement, although ethnographers cannot fully experience what their interlocutors experience (193). In the case of my fieldwork, the process of ethnographic place-making involved drawing upon users’ public recommendations and engaging with the sensorium of these recommended locations: at times alone, and at times with interlocutors. This collaborative place-making was not limited to the Instagram users with whom I had met personally and developed rapport, since public *instabae* posts also facilitated my fieldwork. *Instabae* and Instagram are parts of world-making, and the anthropologist is part of the assemblage of the field site.

Conclusion: Vibrant Visuality as Aesthetic Category and Practice

Sianne Ngai (2012) has coined the zany, the cute, and the interesting as three aesthetic categories that resound in late capitalism and its associated patterns of commodification, mass-mediation, and performance. I propose the vibrant as a fourth aesthetic category. The vibrant, as embodied by the filtering effects and curation of visual-centric SNS such as Instagram, has become central to consumerism and marketing campaigns. *Instabae* and *#tabijeni* are two case studies of this centrality. In addition, I propose vibrant visibility as both analytical mode and practice of placemaking. Through vibrant visibility, we—as scholars, observers, ethnographers, and users—can contemplate the appeal of and motivation behind a “filtered” representation of experiences and places.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the vibrant visibility of *instabae* and Instagram is a form of media mix that is situated within the larger array of SNS and participatory cultures in Japan. Furthermore, space/place, urban ecologies, and physical landscapes are integrated within this media mix. There is great potential in ethnographic and multimodal approaches to *instabae* culture in Japan and iterations of “Instagenic” culture worldwide. A productive practice would be to create a digital archive of *instabae* spaces, mapping the potential difference between *instabae*

and *riaru*—in other words, the difference between digital representation and offline ontology. Such a practice can even involve smartphone functionalities of geotagging (Figures 1.13, 1.14, and 1.15).²⁸ Ethnographic approaches to Instagram must also consider larger histories of participatory culture. In the next chapter, I draw upon Instagram usage among girls and women to propose that new visual participatory cultures are extensions of past and ongoing forms of gendered socialities and economies. As I will demonstrate, while many of the assemblages of Reiwa Japan may be rooted in the perceived “new” medium of the digital and are also practiced within the context of a new era, it is imperative to consider how these practices diverge from or fit within larger histories and discussions of media cultures and space.

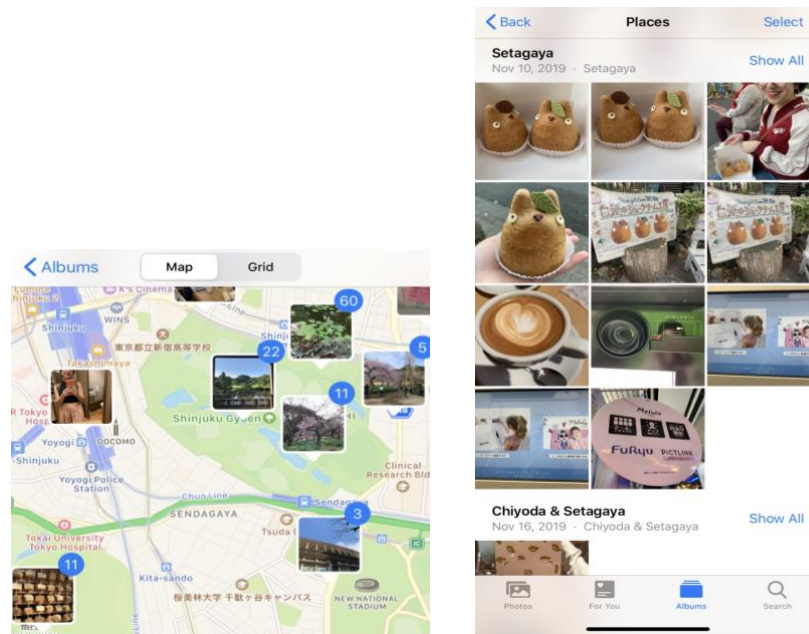


Figure 1.13: Geotagging of photographs taken in various locations in Tokyo. The left image is a screenshot of a map focused on fieldwork locations. The right is an album of photographs taken during a field excursion in Setagaya Ward.

²⁸ In my case, this was provided by the geotagging functions of my iPhone’s “Photos” application.

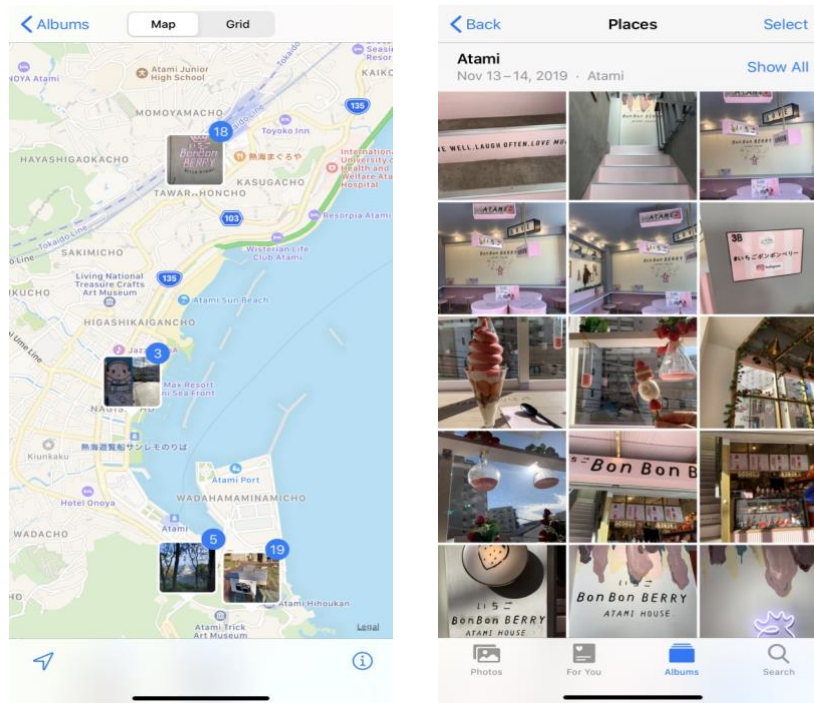


Figure 1.14: Geotagging of photographs taken in the city of Atami.

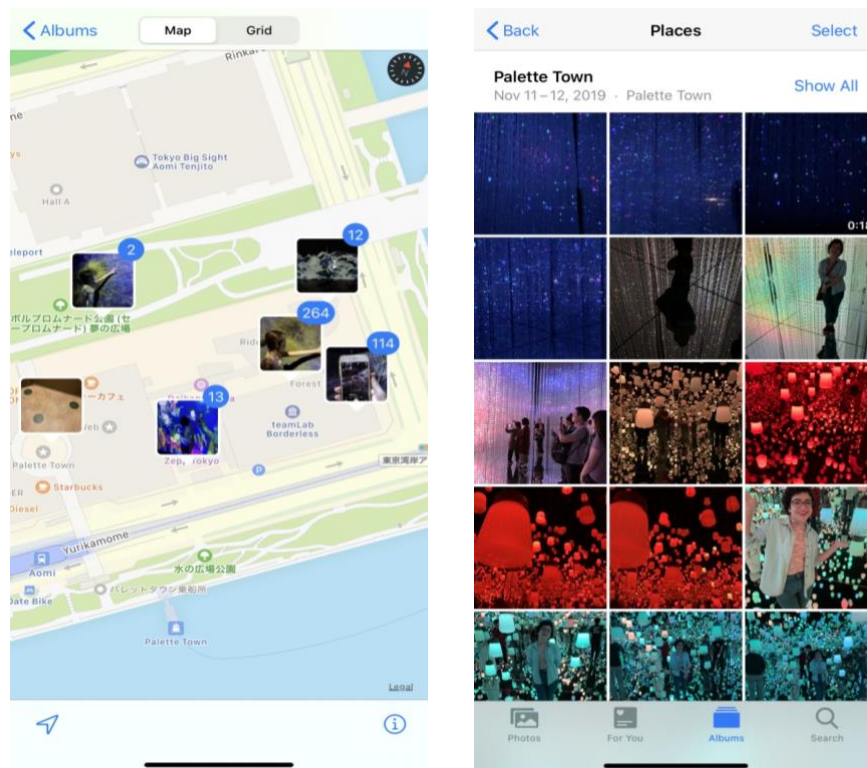


Figure 1.15: Geotagging of photographs taken in Odaiba, heavily featuring teamLab Borderless.



Mediation: teamLab Borderless

Throughout my fieldwork, I had learned that a particular venue in Odaiba was immensely popular as an *instabae* spot, titled MORI Building DIGITAL ART MUSEUM: teamLab Borderless.²⁹ The venue, which is a collaboration between the international art collective teamLab and Epson Sales Japan Corporation, features projections and installations sprawling across 10,000 square meters of space. The theme of the venue, “Borderless,” is embodied by the continuous movement of projected artworks across the multiple walls of the space. The projections change on an hourly basis and even reflect the changes in the season. The upper level of the venue bears a tea house in which a floral projection maps onto visitors’ drinks—the floral projection crumbles as the tea cup is lifted, and its petals disperse throughout the table. In an area of the museum titled Sketch Aquarium, visitors draw aquatic animals on a piece of paper, which is subsequently scanned by museum personnel. The aquatic animal on the paper then comes to life, appearing as a projection on the walls of the space alongside sketches drawn by other visitors. The intermedia approach of teamLab Borderless is a sensorial and collaborative one. Due to its popularity among users of SNS, I visited teamLab Borderless twice: the first time with an acquaintance, and the second time with Mako.

During my first visit to teamLab, I find myself excited yet overwhelmed about the vibrant visuality of the space. The projections were hypnotic, brightly illuminated within the space’s dark interior. This vibrant visuality is simultaneously a source of overwhelming anxiety. I feel pressured to take as many photos as I can to capture the vibrancy of the space. Admittedly, I also want to be photographed with the space to boost my own SNS presence. This is amplified by the presence of museum visitors, many of whom are youths and tourists, who are doing the same. After hours of taking photos on my smartphone, I head to the vending machines near the public restroom for much-needed rest and hydration. I purchase a bottle of water and sit on a bench next to two elderly women. They look fatigued and are slumped against the wall while chatting

²⁹ Refer to the teamLab Borderless website for more information: <https://borderless.teamlab.art/>.

amongst themselves. After we lock eyes, we begin to converse casually. The two women confess that they are quite tired from walking around the museum. One of the women mentions that she had received tickets to teamLab for free, though she would not come again even if she won more free tickets. She comments not only on the fatigue of navigating the space—which is dimly lit and does not have much seating—as an elderly woman, but also comments that the space is indeed part of the “youth world” (*wakamono no sekai*).

Both women eventually ask about my own reasons for being in Japan. I explain my research, and both mention that it made perfect sense as to why I chose to visit teamLab. Both women then begin to lament that it is difficult to take clear pictures in the space because of the constant projections shining in visitors’ faces. Of course, this is the point of the space—the projections on visitors’ bodies are what marks the space as *instabae*. The women are aware of this and comment on the difference between “aesthetic” shots and taking a clear, direct shot. I take the opportunity to ask the two women about their opinions on SNS and smartphone usage among youths. Both comment that the advantage of these technologies is the ability to get information in real time, such as train schedules. According to both women, some disadvantages include the possible misinterpretation of information, the inability to know if a user’s conveyed message embodies their true emotions (*hontō no kimochi*), and the deterioration of eyesight. A consequence of these technologies that is considered to be a mixed bag is the fact that the world becomes smaller: it is easy to obtain information and interact with users from all around the world, yet there is also the risk of cultivating an “echo chamber” of single views. I thank the women for their time, exchange goodbyes, and continue my exploration of the museum.



Figure 1.16: Mako capturing a colorful moment in teamLab.

Visiting teamLab Borderless with Mako several months later is a different experience. Mako is a fan of teamLab, even creating a separate Instagram account just to document her multiple visits to the space. She is knowledgeable of the meaning of several of the projections and installations, providing me with instructions on how to engage with the space. When entering a corridor, we encounter projections of animals covered with flowers: a kangaroo with fluorescent pink flowers, a giraffe with sunflowers, to name a few. “*Sawatte mite kudasai*. Please try touching it.” Mako says with polite anticipation, while pulling out her phone. I touch a bird adorned with flowers: the bird then looks “at” me and squawks. Flowers then scatter from its body, revealing flowerless patches. Mako documents this experience on video.

Next, we enter a room full of mirrors and walls bearing projections of brightly colored flowers. I am especially drawn to the projections of sunflowers, my favorite flower. The snapping of photos begins. While I quickly begin taking photos without thinking much about technique, I notice that Mako is very slow and intentional in her photo-taking. I observe that when Mako takes photos, she holds her phone over the desired image for several seconds. She then presses the screen to activate the brightness capture. Mako is deliberate and cautious in her

photo-taking, which is a stark contrast to my rather quick and haphazard style. And it certainly pays off—her images are beautiful.

We walk down another corridor and come across the projection sequence of flying birds. Mako enthusiastically exclaims that this is the projection that she had spoken about during our first conversation, and one that she had featured in her teamLab Instagram account. We watch, and both of us take videos. I am mesmerized. The colors and music are lovely, and the motion of the bird's flight truly makes me feel as if I am flying, too. The motions are hypnotizing and intricate, at some points even causing me to feel dizzy. After the bird projection, there is another projection sequence of flowers.

Towards the end of our outing. Mako asks me if there is any other room to which I want to return. I tell her that there is an image that I had seen on Instagram that I wish to imitate. In this image, the photographer captures a woman's smartphone camera screen as she is taking a photo on her smartphone. For the cover of my dissertation, I want to do something similar. However, the image is not saved onto my phone. I hastily look for it in the corridor and waterfall room but cannot find it. I then explain the concept to Mako. She pulls out her phone and shows me a photo from Instagram that embodies the same concept that I want to imitate. "You mean like this?" She asks. I exclaim in the affirmative. We then set on a quest to take those photos, and Mako serves as a guide. We try it in several locations, ranging from walls of flower projections to the strobe light room. I truly appreciate Mako's help and patience and thank her profusely.

Towards the end of our teamLab outing, I notice that Mako begins to ask me if I can take photos of her. She wants to be photographed in front of flowers that catch her eye, along with the iconic waterfall in the exhibit's largest room. I try my best to take photos of her, but my photos are nowhere near the same quality as the ones she had taken of me. I wonder if Mako's request means that she is warming up to me. Prior to this, she had been shy. Whenever I asked Mako if she wanted me to photograph her, she responded with a frazzled: "No it's okay!" However, she would photograph me at various points. Throughout the whole outing, I feel quite shy about the fact that she is taking so many photos of me. "I feel like a model!" I mention with a nervous

laugh. She laughs in response. I realize that perhaps the act of taking photos is an activity that Mako enjoys. Perhaps this is something she enjoys doing with friends, her way of making memories and also honing her photographic craft.



Figure 1.17: A photograph of the author, taken by Mako.

Before leaving teamLab, there is one final wall: it is dark, and nothing is projected. But Mako asks if we could wait a bit. Apparently, this wall is where a projection appears that also exists in teamLab's Shanghai location. When one person touches the work in one location, it lights up in a way that the person in the other location could see. We wait and wait, squinting at the wall when we see some portions light up faintly. Finally, the work of art begins to float in. "It's here!" Mako exclaims. We watch as an entanglement of roots appears. Mako tells me to touch it. I do, and it radiates. I ask if people in Shanghai would see it light up, and she confirms this. At one point, the roots grow bright on our side, meaning that someone in Shanghai is also touching the projection. At one point, a projection of a sunflower-covered giraffe appears on top of the roots. Mako touches the wall, and sunflower petals appear over the entanglement of roots. Eventually, projections of fish and other animals appear on the adjacent wall. Mako touches the

school of fish in a circular motion, and the school of blue fish turns brown and rotates. After this final engagement with the exhibit, we leave. On the way out, we marvel at promotional videos of teamLab museums around the world and in Japan. Mako exclaims aloud that she wants to go to the exhibit that would be opening in Kyushu in August. We watch a video of teamLab in Singapore, commenting that we wish to visit.

In this Mediation, we see two very different views and experiences of teamLab. While the elderly women could not see the appeal of the exhibit, Mako was enthralled. I, too, enjoyed the experience and thoroughly engaged via touch and photography. I should comment here that I am not much older than Mako—I was 26 at the time of our excursion. These episodes indicate that perceptions of what constitutes vibrant visuality and enjoyable forms of participatory culture can differ based on age. Furthermore, these episodes indicate potential stereotyping and misunderstandings of trends and participatory cultures that are associated with youth. It is beneficial to look beyond the surface of these trends and instead focus on the potential of these trends as sensorial and social experiences.

Chapter Two

Digitizing Women's Worlds:

Gendered Spheres of Sociality, Visual Participatory Culture, and "New" Mediatic Assemblages

Mediation: The World as Photobooth

The practice of taking and uploading photographs using Instagram's filters and effects can be viewed as an extension of *purikura* culture. *Purikura*, a colloquialism for "print club" (*purinto kurabu*), are photo booths that allow users to take photographs, edit the photographs using a stylus and touch screen, and receive instant prints of these photographs. The term may also refer to the instant prints themselves, which double as stickers and are often small enough to be placed inside of a wallet or pasted onto a phone. Since their introduction in 1995, *purikura* have been core to girls' culture and sociality, and sometimes but not always coalesce with larger *kawaii* culture (Kinsella 1995; Miller 2003; Chaflen and Murui 2004; Miller 2005; Sandbye 2014). *Purikura* centers bear gendered indexes, as they are often decorated with pink hues and images of young women. This gendered nature is evident in signs within some *purikura* centers that ban boys and men from using the booths unless they are accompanied by at least one girl or woman.³⁰

³⁰ In conversations with interlocutors about this ban, several mentioned that this rule is possibly due to incidents of stalking and unwanted attention from "perverts". This ban may thus attempt to establish *purikura* centers as a safe space for girls and women. However, while concerns of sexual harassment and unwanted attention are valid, the barring of those who are not girls or women from taking *purikura* is discriminatory and exclusionary for boys, men, and trans and non-binary individuals.



Figure 2.1: Various *purikura* centers. Photographs taken by the author in 2017 and 2020.



Figure 2.2: The exterior of two *purikura* booths. Photographs taken by the author in 2017.



Figure 2.3: The interior quirks of some *purikura* centers. The first two photos are from a love fortune booth in a *purikura* center. The third photo is a makeup corner that is common in many *purikura* centers. Taken by the author in 2019 and 2020.



Figure 2.4: Various signs banning the presence of unaccompanied men. Photographs taken by the author between 2017-2020.

Purikura are material assemblages that also involve a set of practices. First, users pay the fee to use the photo booth using the machine's coin slot and determine the default settings for their session.³¹ These settings include default edits related to skin tone and eye size along with the desired layout of the final print product.³² Users then enter the photo booth itself via its vinyl

³¹ Depending on the location and the type of machine, this fee can range from 300 yen to 600 yen.

³² Users can either lighten (or “whiten”) their skin tone or select an approximation to their actual skin tone. Eye size editing usually exists on a scale of regular, medium, and large. While multiple machines utilized a scale in their editing settings, others used phrases or descriptive adjectives in referring to a certain aesthetic. For example, during my fieldwork I observed that one machine used the term *kawaii* (cute) in referring to a default setting that featured round, blushing cheeks, while the term *kūru* (cool) was used in referring to a setting that slimmed the users face and added “icey” features. The editing features of

curtains. The inside of the booth bears a green screen backdrop and floor, bright lights, a camera, and a miniature monitor that relays visual instructions and suggestions for poses. Users step a certain distance from the photo booth's camera and begin posing for photos. Throughout the process, an automated voice—always feminine—offers instructions and initiates the countdowns.

After the photo-taking process, users head to the “graffiti” (*rakugaki*) booth to edit their photographs. This process of editing may involve the augmentation or slimming of bodily features, the addition of makeup, the addition of silly stickers such as animal ears, and the writing of text. After this stage, users then select the edited photographs that they wish to have printed. Contemporary *purikura* allow users to input their e-mail address or mobile phone number to receive digital copies of their edited and original photographs. After selecting their desired photographs, users then wait for the photographs to be printed. The prints emerge from a tiny slot located towards the front of the booth. After receiving their prints, users can cut individual photos using nearby scissors and exchange these photos with their friends.

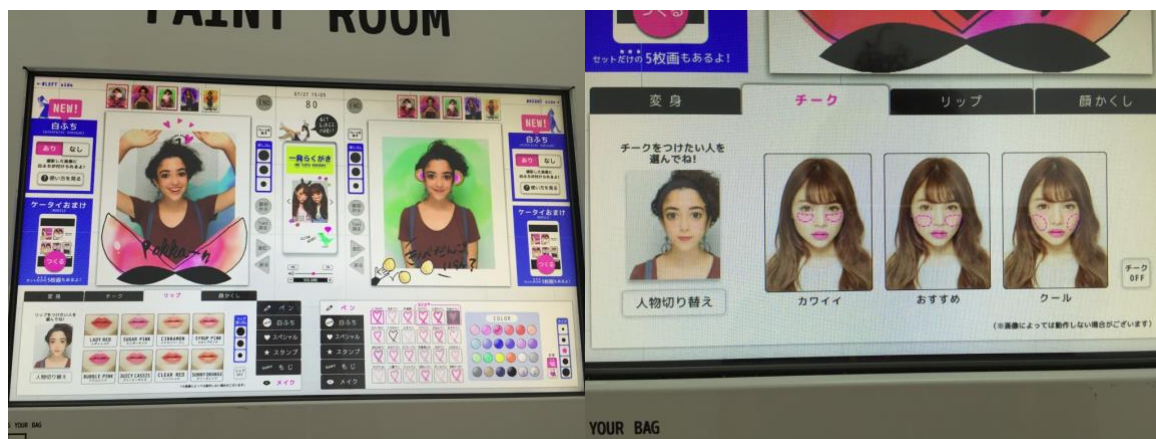


Figure 2.5: Images of the *rakugaki* process. Photograph taken by the author in 2016.

purikura raise myriad questions regarding beauty standards. This is a topic that merits its own article or chapter.



Figure 2.6: Standard passport photograph of the author taken in 2016 (left), juxtaposed with a *purikura* photograph taken in the same year (right). The *purikura* photograph was taken with its default filter and editing options. Note that the author’s skin has been lightened, her curls have been smoothed, her eyes have been enlarged, and her facial and bodily features have been slimmed down.

Smartphones and visual-centric SNS such as Instagram constitute portable *purikura*. The filters, stickers, and editing features on Instagram are not unlike those found within the process of *rakugaki*. Most importantly, smartphones and SNS have become enveloped in the media ecology of *purikura*. Manufacturers of *purikura* such as Makesoft offer their own smartphone apps that ease the process of saving digital copies of *purikura* and sharing these copies on SNS. In conversations with young women, I learned that it was not uncommon to “research” potential poses and editing strategies for *purikura* on Instagram. This saves stress and time during the actual practice of taking *purikura*. The prevalence of hashtags on Instagram such as #*purika* pose (#*purikura* pōzu; #プリクラポーズ) and #*purikura* editing (#*purikura* kakō; #プリクラ加工) demonstrate reliance on user-created content as a source of information and inspiration for creativity. *Purikura* is becoming even more convergent.



Figure 2.7: The camera found within the interior of a *purikura* booth. Photographs taken by the author in 2017.



Figure 2.8: In this advanced model, users can control the angle of the camera more freely. Photograph taken by the author in 2020.

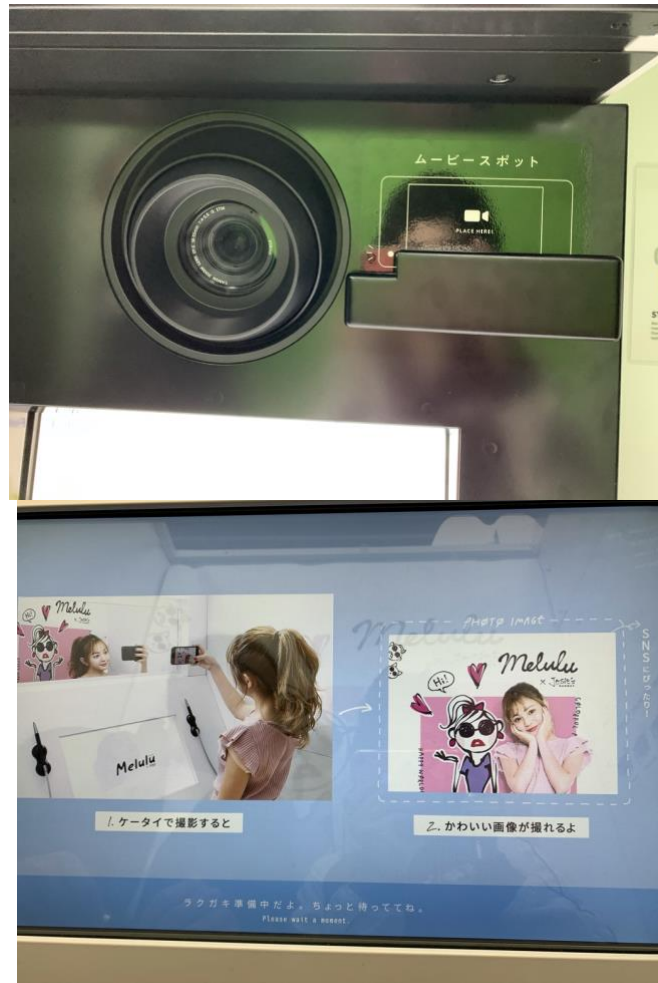


Figure 2.9: A spot within a *purikura* booth, near the machine's main camera, in which users can rest their smartphones and concurrently record videos. This highlights the increasingly convergent nature of *purikura* booths. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.



Figure 2.10: Photograph of a *purikura* model that is compatible with SNS. Note the inclusion of the term *haeru*. Photograph taken by the author in 2020.

Over the course of my fieldwork in Japan, I noticed that the cost of *purikura* was steadily increasing. I asked Hitomi, a high school senior, about the fate of *purikura*: would these photo booths survive, or would they eventually be displaced by SNS such as Instagram? Hitomi answered that the practice of taking *purikura* and the practice of taking photographs on Instagram are different experiences. With regards to *purikura*, individuals are ultimately paying for an *experience*, for the practice of “being together.” Ultimately, the practice of collectively brainstorming or researching poses, performing these poses, and editing the photographs into a tangible keepsake marked *purikura* as a distinctive bonding experience. *Purikura* may develop more advanced features. Furthermore, practices such as *rakugaki* may change. For example, Hitomi commented that the current trend among high school girls was to *not* do *rakugaki*—minimalism was in vogue, as it gives the final photograph a mature aesthetic. Yet regardless of these changes, it is likely that these photobooths are here to stay.



Figure 2.11: A photo corner in an ice cream store on Takeshita Street. Photographs taken by the author in 2020.

The visual participatory culture of Instagram is reminiscent of the participatory nature of *purikura*.³³ During my fieldwork, I observed that several establishments serving food that was deemed “Instagenic” had a designated photo-taking area complete with a backdrop. Such establishments were especially common in Takeshita Street in Harajuku, a hub of youth culture that is also lined with *purikura* centers. Here, we may consider how the smartphone camera becomes analogous to the camera within photo booths. The smartphone camera’s flash, accessories such as ring lights, and the use of lightening filters on SNS such as Instagram become analogous

³³ This will undoubtedly extend to other visual-centric SNS. During my fieldwork, I noticed that participation in TikTok—a short video platform—was already mirroring participation in *purikura*. Whereas *purikura* focuses on posing for the camera, TikTok often involves dancing to short audio clips.

to the lighting assemblage found within photo booths. The *world* becomes a photo booth, and surroundings become a green screen backdrop.



What role do the affordances of Social Networking Services (SNS) and smartphones play in the creation of gendered spheres of sociality? Can a platform be gendered? This is a question that pervaded my time in the field. During a social gathering, a male *shakaijin* asked me about my research. When I mentioned my particular interest in how Instagram is used among youths in Japan, he responded: “Insta? Isn’t that for girls?” While I spoke with several male interlocutors who disagreed with this young man’s statement and also encountered multiple men who use Instagram, this remark is still telling of a wider perception of the gendered nature of Instagram. This gendering is something that I also encountered when I attended “Instagram Lectures” (*Insta kōza*) in Tokyo. These lectures were usually taught by marketing specialists. The attendees included employees sent by their companies for marketing insight, SNS users seeking to develop their own online businesses or pages, and even older individuals who wished to learn how to use the popular platform. At the lectures that I attended throughout my fieldwork, marketing specialists spoke of the importance of women consumers and the high demographic of young women on Instagram, particularly those in their 20s.

In the previous chapter, I highlighted how the vibrant visuality of Instagram fits within the genealogy of *keitai* studies, media convergence theory, and burgeoning discourse on digital and multimodal ethnography. In this chapter, I map the flows of change and continuity, divergence and convergence, as they relate to the intersections of gender and visual participatory culture in contemporary Japan. In particular, I highlight how “new” mediatic assemblages involving SNS and smartphones are extensions of past and ongoing forms of gendered socialities and economies. Here, I would like to note that I define assemblage as an open and flexible system, and mediatic as involving various forms of media (print, digital, and more), their distribution, their consumption,

and even their “ambience.” Using the case study of *instabae* culture and Instagram use among girls and young women, I suggest that the participatory cultures of new and “old” mediatic assemblages can teach us about sociality, intimacy, branding of the self, and mediation of the self.

In the first section, I discuss why examinations of gender and digital technologies matter, both within and beyond the context of Japan. In the second section, I draw upon the case study of *tabijeni* (“photogenic travel”) ambassadors to highlight how digital participatory cultures can allow us to return to historical marketing literature and consumerist practices. In the third section, I propose that visual participatory cultures such as *instabae* culture are extensions of already-existing social practices among girls and women that center on visibility and materiality, such as *purikura* (“print club”) culture. In the fourth section, I examine Instagram as an economy, offering a preliminary examination of entrepreneurial uses of Instagram and practices of “self-branding” among girls and women. In the chapter’s conclusion, I propose that the images and networks mediated via digital participatory cultures can grant insight into (gendered) worldmaking.

Digitizing Women’s Worlds

How can we begin to understand why Instagram is popular among young women? Furthermore, what makes the pursuit of *instabae*, as discussed in the previous chapter, so appealing? The practice may be confusing to some, given that this may also involve a dissonance between the site as captured in a filtered image and how it actually exists—in other words, a dissonance between online representation and offline ontology. To these individuals, the adding of the filter to one’s own captured image may seem to contribute to a cycle of duplicity or misrepresentation. Observers of *instabae* culture may also question why certain spaces, places, and objects are even worthy of attention at all.³⁴ Those who pursue *instabae* may also garner criticism. During an outing in Shibuya with Akiko, we passed by a fancy café where shaved ice (*kakigōri*) was being offered for a whopping 1,500 yen. We laughed at this overpricing. Akiko

³⁴ Recall Mediation: teamLabs Borderless within Chapter 1.

commented that people who dine there are probably *ishiki takaikei*: individuals who are very conscious as to how they appear to others. I asked if she believed that this was applicable to influencers, and she nodded her head in agreement.

It is easy to judge participation in *instabae* culture as meaningless, or as an embodiment of *ishiki takaikei*. At first glance, participants seem to be taking and uploading photographs for an audience, whether this audience may be private or public. However, there is more to the picture, as is often the case with engagement on SNS. Misunderstandings or dismissals of practices associated with SNS such as Instagram are not uncommon. Abidin (2016) disputes the claim that the practice of taking “selfies”—self-portraits frequently taken by means of a smartphone camera—is frivolous and vain. Utilizing the case study of social media “influencers”, or micro-celebrities, in Singapore, Abidin argues that the practice should rather be considered to be a form of subversive frivolity. Abidin defines subversive frivolity as “the under-visibilized and underestimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive” (2). In the context of influencers in Singapore, selfies are powerful, wide-spreading commercial tools that also require extensive (gendered) labor. Abidin explains:

I contemplate how Influencers are using selfies to reap personal gains — both monetary and self-actualizing — and shape the social media ecology in Singapore through their highly gendered labor. Despite populist discursive framing of selfies as mere frivolity, this has allowed the labor in which Influencers engage to slide under the radar, in the ways they subvert affordances of Instagram, the expectations of female entrepreneurs, the gaze of the camera, and representations of authenticity. (2)

While appearing to constitute simple acts of posing and pressing buttons, the actual practice of taking selfies is more performative and strategic than anticipated—from posing in a way that accentuates bodily features to editing the final product. Thus, the practice is also a form of tacit labor, “a collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibilized from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious” (10).

The relationships between digital platforms, digital technologies, and gender in various contexts must be taken seriously. Indeed, these relationships grant rich insight into processes of worldmaking and infrastructures of “seeing, thinking, and knowing” (Waltorp 2020). Within her ethnography of smartphone usage among young Muslim women in the social housing area known as Blaagaarden in Copenhagen, Waltorp (2020) explores how the affordances of smartphones serve as a “relational device” and facilitate “real virtuality” by aggregating acquaintances located across various geographies and providing new opportunities for networking (4). In exploring what Muslim women “do” with smartphones and social media, Waltorp illustrates how online spaces are not parallel worlds; rather, these worlds are part of “everyday, emplaced, embodied living and webs of reciprocity.” For these women, “being online” is actually “a fundamentally social practice” of selective visibility (3). The portability of the smartphone also facilitates understandings of the roles of urban space and online/offline movements in the everyday lives of her interlocutors. Similarly, in her work on the role of digital media in the lives of Black women in Britain, Sobande (2020) explores how “digital spaces shape the identities, self-expression, and lives of Black women in Britain, and how Black women shape digital spaces, and environments beyond, but, connected to them” (9). Sobande highlights how regionality affects the lives of Black women both online and offline, as Black (digital) experiences cannot be reduced to a monolith. The digital ultimately facilitates sentiments of (dis)connection between Black women in Britain and Black women in other countries.

It is worth noting these aforementioned examinations of gender and digital technologies are prefaced with “why”. The first chapter of Sobande’s text is titled: “Why the Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain?” (interrogative “why”), while Waltorp’s entire text is titled: *Why Muslim Women and Smartphones* (emphatic “why”). This “why” bears nuances that are not unlike the nuances of the “in” of “in Asia” or “in Japan” (Ito 2005; Maitra and Chow 2015; Galbraith and Karlin 2016; Lamarre 2017). In an ideal future, it will no longer become necessary to preface examinations of gender and digital technologies outside of the context of the United States with

“why.” In the meantime, as we wait until this need for a “why” becomes dismantled, I offer my own response to: Why smartphone and SNS usage among Japanese girls and women?

The intersections between gender and mobile phones have constituted an area of interest among scholars specializing in Japan. As I outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, *keitai* culture has been heavily associated with youth culture, particularly schoolgirl culture. This association originated with pager culture in the early 1990s—while initially used as a business medium by salarymen, schoolgirls transformed the Pocket Bell pager into a social tool that could also be personalized through decorative stickers. Youths, and schoolgirls in particular, also transformed *keitai* in a similar manner (Fujimoto 2005; Habuchi 2005; Matsuda 2005; Okada 2005). Hjorth (2003; 2009) has discussed how *kawaii* aesthetics and gender have long figured into *keitai* usage and device personalization among girls and young women.³⁵ Similarly, Katz and Sugiyama (2005) have discussed how *keitai* are used and perceived as a fashion accessory among this same demographic.

It is crucial to note that these foundational works were published prior to the rise of SNS in Japan and center on the affordances of the dominant mobile phone model at the time: *garakei*. Here, I wish to build upon this core literature by contributing an examination of the role of visual participatory cultures in creating gendered spheres of sociality. Furthermore, I wish to include a discussion of the role of the amplified affordances of smartphones in these relationships, particularly as these affordances relate to photography and connectivity.

Gendered social spheres and divisions of labor have long been of interest to anthropologists of Japan. As Borovoy (2005) has explained, the ideal of the “good wife and wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) was used by statesmen in the Meiji era to promote Japan’s projects of “modernization and nation-building” (15). The home became a sphere of authority and empowerment for women, leading to the emerging of the “professional housewives” of the late 1950s and 1960s (19). Women’s labor—emotional and physical—as housewives and mothers served as the backbone of

³⁵ The linkage of *kawaii* culture and gender has formed a significant area of focus in Japanese Studies. See Kinsella 1995, McVeigh 1996, Miller 2011, and Yano 2013.

the spheres of schools and companies that were related to the perceived “economic postwar miracle” of Japan (8). This was—and still is—evident in mothers’ intimate involvement in children’s education, especially in the context of the rigorous standardized exams of the education system in Japan. We also see this intimate care take on other forms in contemporary Japan—for example, the role of “citizen scientist” taken on by mothers in Fukushima as they monitor radiation levels in food sources (Kimura 2016). With regards to the gendered spheres and divisions within the workplace, Ogasawara (1998) has examined the division of labor in Japanese corporations between salarymen and “OLs”, or office ladies. Sociality among young girls in schools has also been examined, ranging from sociolinguistic examinations of schoolgirl speech to the creation of the subjectivity of the schoolgirl via film and anime (Inoue 2006; Kinsella 2014). Consumerist play has been noted as a core component of girls’ sociality and is a theme that is especially relevant to my own research.

The vibrant viscosity of visual-centric platforms such as Instagram bears more power than meets the eye. We must move beyond the image to consider the practices associated with these platforms and how these practices fit within mediascapes and the social fabric of everyday life. While in the previous chapter I highlighted the vibrant viscosity of *instabae* as media mix and ethnographic practice, here I propose that this vibrant viscosity constitutes a form of gendered sociality and economy.³⁶ I am interested in how Instagram becomes embedded in gendered social spheres. Marketing statistics compiled by consultant agencies such as NapoleonCat reveal that in March 2021, women accounted for 61.2% of Instagram users in Japan. With regards to age, the age group of 18-24 were the highest user demographic (NapoleonCat 2021). The gendered sociality and economy of Instagram is part of a mediatic assemblage of screen and print cultures directed towards young women consumers spanning across decades (Lukács 2013; Freedman 2017; Frederick 2006; Frederick 2018; Marshall 2019). In considering how participatory cultures

³⁶ At the same time, we should beware of defaulting to a conflation of viscosity and gender. The conflation of *instabae* and gender can cause controversy, as demonstrated by the June 2020 “museum girl” (*bijutsukan joshi*) campaign that insinuated that young women go to art museums for photoshoots, rather than to enjoy the pieces.

on SNS as mediated through smartphones fit within these mediatic assemblages, we must also consider how these participatory cultures reflect both change *and* continuity in gendered practices, socialities, and economies—along with the body of literature that examines these very phenomena. As Chun (2016) reminds us, we must recall that the “new” in new media is not really “new”. The Nippon Travel Agency’s (NTA) #tabijeni (# タビジェニ) campaign is a perfect entry point of analysis.

A Return to Girlscape

#Tabijeni is a combination of the terms “journey” (*tabi*) and “photogenic” (*fotojenikku*). Bearing the slogan “Introducing ‘photogenic’ pictures that make you want to search for your next journey,” the campaign aims to promote local and international tourist sites that center on the photogenic—or more specifically, the “Instagenic.”³⁷ NTA’s suggested #tabijeni plans and travel packages include “*instabae* golden routes” and “*instabae* pilgrimages” (*meguri*) within locations such as Kyoto and Melbourne. Yet another part of the #tabijeni campaign is the selection of “tabijeni ambassadors,” who tend to be Instagrammer “travel reporters” who frequently post aesthetically pleasing photographs and videos of their travels. These ambassadors are featured on the NTA’s #tabijeni page; furthermore, the ambassadors market themselves as part of the #tabijeni campaign on their own Instagram “bios.” This relationship can be considered symbiotic, as NTA benefits from the labor of the ambassadors’ posts and the ambassadors benefit from the added “clout” (*eikyōryoku*). Both the NTA and the advertised tourist locations benefit from the labor of tabijeni ambassadors, who take and share photos at these picturesque locations. The gendered nature of #tabijeni is also made visible through its placement under the “Girls’ Trip” (*joshi tabi*) category of the NTA’s website.

The dynamics at play within NTA’s #tabijeni campaign and *instabae* on a broader scale echo what Yoda (2017) characterizes as “girlscape,” or the “mediatic milieu, disseminated via a variety of media channels, linking feminine bodies, affects, objects, and environment” (176). The

³⁷ To learn more about #tabijeni, refer to the following link: <https://www.nta.co.jp/tabijeni/>.

environment within this milieu may also rely on the use of the city as a medium (182). Girlscape, Yoda describes, was promoted by marketing entities as “the setting of female pleasure and self-fashioning, autonomous of institutions of production and social reproduction, such as the family, the workplace, and school” (176). Although Yoda is referring to marketing and mediatization in the context of Japan in the late 1960s to early 1970s, particularly with regards to the marketing tactics of Parco and Dentsū, this context is important in understanding the genealogy of gendered youth marketing in contemporary Japan. The targeting of youth, particularly single women in their twenties, during this time period was significant in that the previous target demographic of consumers were middle-class women (178-79). Yoda outlines the reasoning for this strategic targeting, which included the perception that young women were not “bound” by societal rules, particularly as these rules relate to the workplace, and could thus travel freely and potentially influence other consumer demographics (180). The appeal of gendered youth marketing furthermore relied on subjectivity and affect embodying “*young thinking* and *young feeling* (or, more specifically, *girl thinking* and *girl feeling*)” (182).

Yoda’s discussion of Dentsū’s Discover Japan (DJ) campaign, which “promoted individuated domestic travel as opposed to organized, group tourism,” is highly applicable to the mobile practices of *instabae* (177). The DJ campaign was known for its advertising via posters in train stations and spreads in fashion and lifestyle magazines, particularly *An·an* and *Non·no*. The visuals of this campaign, Yoda notes, did not focus on specific tourist spots—rather, the visuals “foregrounded the ambience heightened by the unexpected chemistry between the women and their surroundings” (185). This, too, is similar for *instabae*. While specific locations may be highlighted in magazines or webpages highlighting *instabae* spots, ultimately it is the *vibrancy* that is highlighted. There is an emphasis on the “photogenic” nature of these spots, along with the myriad ways in which the embodied vibrancy of these spots can be documented and enjoyed. Visitors are guided on possible forms of engagement with the ambience of the location, which may involve the indulging in and documenting of treats and other local commodities. Just as women’s

mass participation in the DJ campaign was perceived as “a perplexing but harmless outburst of feminine consumerist exuberance,” participants in *instabae* culture are also viewed in a perplexing manner—or, as Akiko mentioned, viewed as *ishiki takaikei* (190). Another intersecting point between DJ and *instabae* is DJ’s emphasis on discovering “myself” and highlighting “the subjective *experience* but not the subject represented” (188). Similarly, *instabae* campaigns wield the language of (girls’) journey (*joshi tabi*), to highlight the solo traveler, the (wannabe) influencer, and the digital auteur. By highlighting journeys, these campaigns also harken to a process of (self-)discovery through intimate time alone or time spent with intimate others.

Yoda acknowledges the multiple debates surrounding young women’s consumption. With regards to the targeted marketing of young women and subsequent patterns of consumption, Yoda raises scholars’ and critics’ concerns of women consumers as duped by capitalist institutions exploiting the notion of subjective transformation (190-92). However, Yoda suggests that girlscape is a political event, “an assemblage of maneuvers against the concrete, local, and yet broadly spread forms of constriction traversing the ordinary lives of young women” (194). For while young women were perceived as bearing more freedom in mobility than men, young women still face multiple constrictions in society and do not enjoy solidified social spaces (192-93).

Instabae and its associated practices are also part of the milieu known as girlscape. The vibrant visuality of *instabae* is promoted through mediatic assemblages of SNS, print media, spaces, and word of mouth. The gendered nature of *instabae* again points to women’s bodies as a medium for marketing (191). In this particular context, young women are marketed targets of *instabae* initiatives due to the rather large demographic of users on Instagram who are young women in their late teens and twenties. The creative use and mastery of Instagram by young women is a form of tacit labor that may benefit the actors who are promoting *instabae* campaigns. As I discussed in the previous chapter, *instabae* and Instagram on a broader scale may be considered to be part of Japan’s media mix. The relationship between content creators online and corporations—for example, the relationship between *tabijeni* ambassadors and the JTB—is also

part of a media mix. Galbraith and Karlin (2016) highlight the relevance of labor and capitalist regimes within media mix, as they state:

When discussing media mixes, scholars need to think about differential ownership; profit sharing, privacy and surveillance; and the freedom and limitation of creative action. We must keep in mind that social life and activity is the “factory” for post-industrial economies. (21)

This use of labor—which young women may enjoy as forms of entertainment and “sharing” yet may not know that this technically counts as labor that benefits an actor—again fosters debate regarding deception. I, like Yoda, suggest that this is part of the story. There is a need to foreground the agency of young women, especially considering the participatory culture of *instabae* and the centrality of this culture to youth sociality. The entanglement of *instabae* with sociality, embodied by engagement with *meguri*, points to girlscape’s ability to allow “continual experimentation with and the performance of one’s personality or connectedness to social groups” (174).

Yoda is speaking of girlscape in the context of Japan in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, we see that these dynamics play out in similar ways in contemporary Japan, despite the addition of the “new” media of SNS. In considering *instabae* as part of girlscape in contemporary Japan, we should consider how this milieu operates with neoliberal individualism and capitalist accumulation (184). Furthermore, we may consider how *instabae* fits within historical patterns of consumption and consumerism in Japan (Stevens 2010). The case study of *instabae* may also contribute to existing literature on the intersections of gender, femininity, and digital labor within and beyond the context of Japan (Abidin and Thompson 2012; Lukács 2020). In the next sections, I approach young women’s participation in *instabae* as a form of gendered sociality and economy in contemporary Japan.

Digital Participatory Culture as Extensions of Gendered Sociality

Dentsū’s GAL LABO is a planning team founded in March 2010 with the aim of stimulating not only businesses, but society as a whole through the use of the “power” of girls and

women. In late January 2020, GAL LABO began an online publication series titled *Signs of a Reiwa Girl* (*Reiwa joshi no kizashi*).³⁸ According to GAL LABO, the series ultimately aims to reduce the differences and misunderstandings between adult women and “Reiwa Girls”—those experiencing girlhood in Reiwa Japan—by examining current trends and various facets of contemporary girl culture.

It is perhaps no surprise that the series features an analysis of SNS trends and practices. In the third publication in the series, “Sharing Study Time and Whereabouts: The Reiwa Girl’s Alone Time Is Not Lonely (*Benkyō mo ibasho mo shea. Reiwa joshi no hitori jikan wa hitori jyanai*)”, GAL LABO team member Hikino Anna describes the Reiwa Girl as a subjectivity embodied by sharing. Drawing upon interviews conducted with six high school girls, Hikino suggests that smartphones and SNS have transformed “Alone Time” (*hitori jikan*) into “Share Time” (*shea suru jikan*).³⁹ Hikino suggests that “alone time” is decreasing, as opportunities to connect with others are on the rise. In other words, even if one is “alone” physically, one is still able to connect with others by digital means. Hikino explains that this fits into a longstanding disdain of solitary time among girls, citing social practices such as late-night phone calls, sleepovers, and afterschool hangouts. One example within her examination of sharing among Reiwa Girls is the popularity of study accounts (*benkyō aka*; 勉強垢) on Instagram, along with the corresponding hashtags of #studygram and #benkyō aka. The visuals associated with these accounts and hashtags include, but are not limited to, images of neat study desks, cute stationery, and timers. Drawing upon interviewees’ responses, Hikino states that such images can serve as a source of motivation for youths who are also in the throes of exams or wish to develop skills in note-taking and the organization of study spaces. Furthermore, youths may feel a sense of solidarity in viewing the efforts of other students. Visuality thus sparks motivation, inspiration, and solidarity.

The digital sharing practices described by Hikino are extensions of existing forms of youth sociality. While these practices may be rooted in the “new” medium of the digital and are also

³⁸ The ongoing series can be accessed via the following link: <https://dentsu-ho.com/booklets/391>.

³⁹ These interviews were conducted with the support of corporate marketing agency MyNavi Teens.

practiced within the context of a new era, it is helpful to consider these practices as either diverging from or fitting within a larger history of youth sociality.⁴⁰ It is also productive to consider the centrality of visuality in these practices. When speaking to interviewees about the role of SNS such as Instagram in their social lives, I observed that the terms trends (*hayari*) and connections (*tsunagari*) were especially prevalent. With regards to trends, I observed that participation in popular trends on Instagram constituted a social practice. Here, participation entailed visiting certain locations that were characterized as *instabae* with friends and uploading one's own photographs of the location, photographing and consuming aesthetically pleasing foods, and the like. My conversations with Hitomi and Himawari, both in their final year of high school at the time of their entry interviews, proved to be especially enlightening with regards to participatory culture among young women. At the time of my fieldwork, the consumption and photographing of tapioca drinks—followed by the uploading of these images on Instagram and similar platforms—was a popular practice among young women. The practice of consuming such drinks was so popular that it bore its own verb in youth vernacular, *tapiru* (タピる).

When meeting Hitomi and her mother, Nanao, one afternoon in a shopping mall, I pointed towards a long line of individuals in front of a tapioca kiosk. This was a typical sight, as the tapioca boom was still thriving—although apparently I had missed the height of the boom, which took place before my arrival. Hitomi commented that when the trend first started, she participated frantically with her friends. Over time, she eventually realized that participating in the trend was quite costly, as each drink averaged around 600 yen. Since this realization, she has not been as avid of a participant in the trend. Over the course of my fieldwork, Hitomi was a key informant with regards to visual-centric trends and social practices among high school girls. Yet another trending practice was the act of wearing yukata and kimono in Asakusa, Kyoto, and other locations deemed “traditional,” and uploading photographs of the experience on Instagram. Such photographs were visually pleasing and often required some form of coordination beforehand—

⁴⁰ We may also consider how #studygram fits within historical and ongoing discourse on entrance examinations in Japan, including “exam hell”, mental health, and human capital development.

for example, by arranging for the group to wear matching accessories. Hitomi's mother listened to this explanation with curiosity, surprised that the trend also consisted of wearing yukata and kimono that were subtle (*jimi*) in design and color, rather than vibrant and “cute.”⁴¹ We see that young women's sociality becomes tied with tourism, a dynamic reminiscent of girlscape and the Discover Japan campaign.



Figure 2.12: A strawberry milk tapioca drink from a popular kiosk in Omotesandō, poured in a seashell-shaped container. Customers had the option of selecting the shape of the drink's plastic bottle. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

Gurrieri and Drenten (2019) explain that hashtags on platforms such as Instagram can serve as markers of group identity by providing “a common ground on which consumers can identify like-minded users” (105). The hashtag is not only indexical and citational—it is also an invitation.⁴² This is evident in the prevalence of hashtags such as #I want to connect with stylish people (*#oshare na hito to tsunagaritai*; #オシャレな人と繋がりたい) and #I want to connect

⁴¹ I was personally intrigued that young Japanese women were also renting *yukata* and *kimono* in locations such as Asakusa. Normally, the rental market is popular among foreigners.

⁴² See Bonilla and Rosa 2015 for an analysis of the indexical nature of hashtags. For the citational nature of hashtags, see Nakassis 2012.

with people who like fashion (*#fashion-zuki-na hito to tsunagaritai*; #ファッション好きな人と繋がりたい). My conversations with Hitomi and Himawari revealed the digital practices that are associated with their identities as schoolgirls. The status of *joshi kōsei* (JK) seemed quite important to both Hitomi and Himawari—both lamented that their time as schoolgirls was coming to an end. My past research on *JK burando*, or schoolgirl brand, and the school uniform (*seifuku*) revealed that the subjectivity of the “schoolgirl” is imbued with nostalgic youth. My interviews in 2015 with first-year female college students revealed that the trend of wearing *seifuku* to Disney theme parks even after graduating from high school and documenting this experience was popular because such a practice allowed young women to re-experience that same nostalgic youth (Hassel 2016). The strength of *JK burando* fosters a sense of pride amongst schoolgirls that motivates self-branding. The self-branding in JK culture has persisted since this fieldwork in 2015, a time in which Instagram was just starting to become popular in Japan. Schoolgirls brand themselves by adding the hashtag #jk to their own Instagram posts. They may also denote their own year in high school through the addition of more specific hashtags, such as #jk2 (second year) or #ljk (third year; literally “last *joshi kōsei*”).⁴³

Recall that the original *keitai* camera facilitated social relationships through the photographing and sharing of images of the everyday (Okabe and Ito 2003; Kato et al. 2005). Similarly, the visual affordances of Instagram allow users to maintain their social connections through the acts of viewing and sharing. Manatsu, a *shakaijin*, commented that she uses Instagram to connect with friends from other prefectures, characterizing the viewing of their visual updates as a confirmation that they are doing well.⁴⁴ Mako, a first-year university student, conveyed that

⁴³ In a follow-up conversation after her graduation from high school, I learned that Himawari met other college students through the use of hashtags such as #At__university starting in the spring (*#haru kara marumaru daigaku*; #春から〇〇大学). This was essential during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as she was unable to meet classmates in person. Thus, the act of self-branding continues to take place in accordance to student status. It would be interesting to examine if SNS successfully foster intimacies, belonging, and community-building in “boundless” life stages or liminal life stages, such as the transition to life as *shakaijin*.

⁴⁴ In referring to this, Manatsu used the phrase “I see they’re doing well!” Of particular interest in conversations with interlocutors was the potential concern that ensues if one does *not* post often. The

sharing photographs of daily activities on Instagram can also be a means of sparking conversations and small talk with friends, both online and offline. Such a practice may be considered to be a form of phatic communion or phatic communication (Malinowski 1923; Miller 2008; Nozawa 2015; Abidin 2016; Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen 2020). Phatic communion, as coined by Malinowski, refers to gestures or remarks that aim to advance social relations rather than convey information. Examples of phatic communion include small talk and comments regarding the weather (Malinowski 1923, 313-16). Phatic communication is also a dynamic at play within digital photography. In the specific context of social media and digital photography, Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen (2020) assert that photographs may “entail indices (e.g., objects of shared interests, certain poses or gestures) pointing to the identities, attributes and attitudes of the communicative parties relevant to structuring that relationship” (1053). Thus, the practices of taking photographs and uploading these photographs online can play into already-existing social relationships. Digital photography—or more specifically, iPhoneography—has become embedded in practices and understandings of sociality, communication, memory, and identity formation (van Dijck 2008; Peters and Allan 2018; Jurgenson 2019).

Ultimately, *instabae* culture, facilitated by the enhanced capabilities of smartphone cameras and the affordances of Instagram, is an extension of girls’ social practices that center on visibility and materiality. The group practice of taking and uploading photographs using Instagram’s filters and effects, for example, can be viewed as an extension of *purikura* culture. Chaflen and Murui (2004) explicate that *purikura* stickers can serve as proof of social relationships or commemorations of events. The exchange and presentation of stickers is not only a social practice, but also an informative one—for example, individuals are able to make observations about the composition of certain friend groups. Chaflen and Murui write:

One conclusion here is that *Purikura* practice tends to solidify a social network of friendships with proof that people were together or hung out together. In turn we find connections between consumerism, youth culture and cute culture, all in the interests of

phrase “survival check” (*seizon kakunin*) was used in describing the concerned messages that interlocutors either sent or received in response to lack of updates on SNS.

producing viable and visible pieces of social organisation. (190)

In a similar vein, Sandbye explains that the practice of taking *purikura* serves as a memory activity and visual diary, a social activity, an opportunity to creatively roleplay a certain self, and an opportunity to demonstrate group belonging (116-124).

The participatory nature of *instabae* is thus reminiscent of the playful practices of *purikura*. Visiting locations with friends and documenting the experience online are social practices that can create or solidify social relationships. The uploaded posts on Instagram, like the material prints of *purikura*, can serve as testaments of these relationships. Furthermore, these posts may serve as a form of phatic communication. *Purikura* booths and participatory culture of visual-centric SNS provide a space for gendered sociality, women's worlds, and worldmaking.⁴⁵

Future Considerations: The (Gendered) Self as Brand and Commodity

The popularity of Instagram in the social lives of girls and young women has also been recognized as a source of economic opportunity for individuals and businesses alike. As part of my fieldwork, I attended "Instagram Lectures" hosted by Street Academy, an online skill-sharing platform. These lectures, offered year-round, ranged from topics such as Instagram management for businesses to topics such as perfecting *instabae* hairstyles. When attending Instagram Lectures in Tokyo, I paid close attention to how Instagram usage was narrated by the instructor and how attendees narrated their motivation for attending the lecture. Within these lectures, I was required to introduce myself—after hearing about my research, the instructors warmly welcomed any questions that I had about the content of the lecture and consented to follow-up communications at any point in my fieldwork.

During one lecture in late October 2019, the instructor, a marketing specialist, began with a helpful explanation of the history of SNS in Japan. She then offered tips on how attendees can promote themselves on Instagram and gain 1,000 followers in a single week. The demographic of

⁴⁵ See Massey's (1994) foundational work on the relationship(s) between gender and worldmaking.

the attendees was quite diverse, featuring several businessmen in the Information Technology (IT) sector, a YouTuber who wished to boost his Instagram presence, a manga artist who wished to promote her own work, and an older woman who wished to promote her horoscope business. This initial lecture motivated me to expand my focus to the branding of the self from a capitalist and marketing perspective. I attended more Instagram lectures, both in person and virtually. In another Instagram lecture, the specialist offered me a primer on marketing psychology—for example, he informed me that the use of certain colors in uploaded images can elicit certain emotional responses from potential customers. The last lecture that I attended during my fieldwork was virtual and marketed specifically for women, offering tips on broader usage of SNS and the development of business accounts. These lectures hosted by Street Academy motivated me to consider the following questions in my fieldwork: How is *instabae* culture impacting local economies and consumerism? To what extent can the entrepreneurship offered by Instagram be empowering, especially for women users?

In her piece on the relationship between adolescence and marketing in Japan, White (1995) explains that the subjectivity of the “teenager” in Japan does not merely center on a life stage embodied by puberty and the bridge to adulthood—rather, it embodies style, dreams, and “a way of thinking and behaving” (255). The dynamics explicated by White, although taking place in the late 80s and early 90s, bear some continuity in the dynamics at play within *instabae* and Instagram culture in contemporary Japan. Young women are still the target demographic of marketers. The creation of trends by magazines is similar to the creation of trends on Instagram. The divergence between White’s case studies and Instagram is the latter’s emphasis on user-created content. Rather than only being consumers, young women on Instagram become producers. Supplemental income can very much be gained through content production on Instagram. During my outings to local bookstores, I observed that self-help books centering on using SNS to earn supplemental income were quite prevalent (Figure 2.13). Two terms were prevalent in the titles and content of these books: *burandingu* (branding) and *kyōkan* (shared feeling). The branding of the self through

the curation of an online profile is narrated as an essential skill in making profit.⁴⁶ For example, in her own guidebook published in 2019, influencer and former idol Yūkosu suggests that readers decide on an established narrative and even consider creating an alternate character (*betsu jinkaku*) before proceeding with their online profiles—essentially, readers should imagine themselves as the protagonist of their own story (25-49). The elicitation of sympathy and the establishment of connections were also narrated in self-help books as crucial strategies in gaining and maintaining online followers.

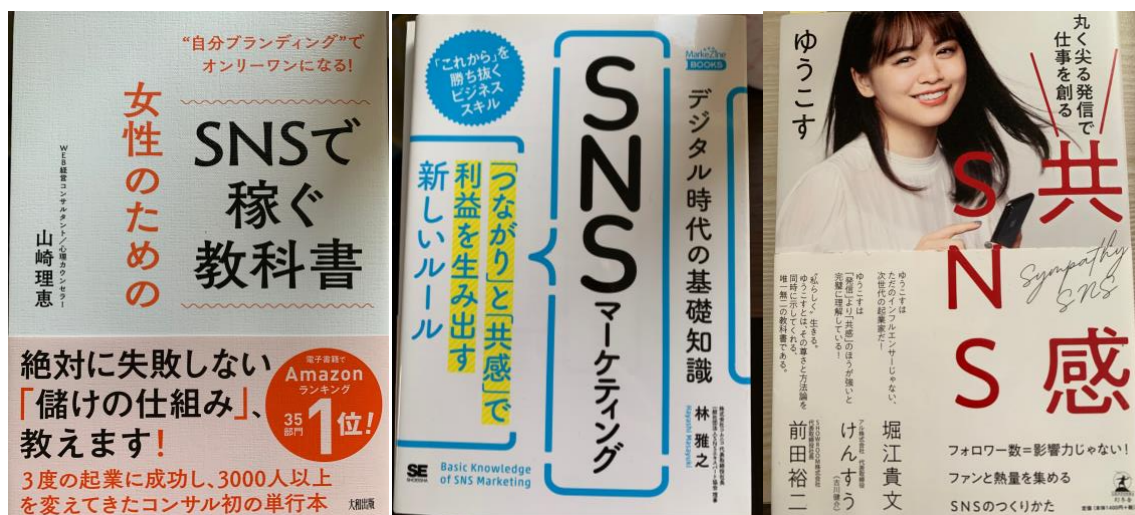


Figure 2.13: Examples of self-help books that provide guidance on using SNS for supplemental income or the development of one's own brand. Translations of the titles are the following: *Become Unique Through Self-Branding! A Textbook for Women on Earning Money Through SNS* (left), *Basic Knowledge in the Digital Age: SNS Marketing* (center), and *Sympathy SNS* (right). Photographs taken by the author.

Marwick (2015) draws upon the notions of microcelebrity and the attention economy to illustrate the curation of Instagram profiles to appeal to certain audiences. Marwick defines microcelebrity as “a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal

⁴⁶ Dentsū's GAL LABO has also written on the role of persona in fan accumulation: <https://dentsu-ho.com/articles/7144>.

information to increase attention and thus improve their online status.” The attention economy, she explains, is “a marketing perspective assigning value according to something’s capacity to attract ‘eyeballs’ in a media-saturated, information-rich world” (138). The uploading of photos onto Instagram may be instigated by the illusion that celebrity status is attainable, which thus leads the user to engage in “self-branding” in order to garner “likes” and “followers”—the acquisition of attention boosts the chance for success (140-57). Within Instagram, tags such as “like for a like”—or in the case of Japan, “*ii ne-gaeshi*” (# いいね返し)—point not only to a desire for attention, but also to the presence of an economy, a system of affective exchange centering on approval (or lack thereof).⁴⁷ The digital practice of self-branding has been examined in the context of the fashion industry, particularly as it relates to the realm of fashion bloggers (Luvaas 2016; Pham 2015). As evident within Pham’s work on Asian fashion superbloggers, this self-branding may also intersect with one’s own identity. By purchasing clothing, posing, and uploading photos, these bloggers are performing labor: a form of labor that also centers on their bodies. She states:

Asian personal style bloggers are especially difficult to categorize in terms of conventional labor classifications. Asian superbloggers are immaterial or informational laborers, yet their gendered racial bodies are of particular importance to their work in this historical period of global fashion capitalism. Their participation in the blogosphere as well as their incorporation into the dominant Western fashion industry are conditioned to a great extent by the cultural economic value of their Asian bodies in this moment that many regard as the Asian decade, which began around 2008. (Pham 2015, 10)

In the case of Asian superbloggers, self-branding may involve a kind of “identity work” in which they must manage and combat the assumptions that are made against them on the basis of race, class, and gender (136). A notable example of identity work is the wielding of language fluency. According to Pham, English-speaking superbloggers in particular garner attention because they are able to maintain their “exotic” appearance while not seeming “so foreign that their racial difference disrupts the postracial fantasy of late capitalism” (16).

⁴⁷ Recall that in Japanese, the term “like” takes the form of *ii ne*, which itself roughly translates to “How nice!”

The branding of the self and the co-opting of connection and sympathy, as in the case of Yūkosu's work, may spark concerns of manipulation. Indeed, these practices play within neoliberal emphases on individualism, capitalist accumulation, and broader processes of capitalist consumption and production (Hearn 2008; Khamis et. al 2017). Through the curation of profiles and a branding of the self that may or may not align with one's "true self," are producers of SNS content duping consumers? This is a valid concern that was also raised by interlocutors.⁴⁸ However, we must also consider the socioeconomic backdrops that motivate the use of SNS as a form of supplemental income.

In her groundbreaking work on the role of Japanese women's invisible labor in building Japan's digital economy, Lukács (2020) draws attention to the opportunities of the digital in the wake of gender-wage disparity and discriminatory hiring practices. She states:

In the late 1990s Japan, in a social context in which labor market deregulation further marginalized women from salaried employment, digital technologies promised women opportunities to sidestep the discriminatory hiring practices in the traditional labor market. While digital cameras were promoted as tools of emancipation that enabled women to take charge of their representation, blogging platforms invited women to discover and develop their talents. (22)

These dynamics continue in Reiwa Japan, as gender-wage disparity remains a significant socioeconomic issue. Within the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2021, Japan ranked 120th out of 156 countries on the basis of gender parity. In the more specific ranking of economic participation and opportunity, Japan ranked 117th.⁴⁹ Young postgrads in Japan today face precarious employment prospects in a precarious labor market (Allison 2013; Brinton 2011). Indeed, this was conveyed to me by Lulu, who lamented that individuals in her age group have to work multiple jobs due to the decline of lifetime employment. SNS such as Instagram serve as tools to creatively and efficiently earn income in a precarious labor market. The precarity of the

⁴⁸ For further discussion of authenticity and SNS, see Chapter 4: "Are the Kids Alright?"

⁴⁹ The World Economic Forum explains that the 2021 index may have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic: "preliminary evidence suggests that the health emergency and the related economic downturn have impacted women more severely than men, partially re-opening gaps that had already been closed."

labor market was intensified during the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, further demonstrating the value of the digital. Businesses suffered due to the rapid decline of customers, leading to store closures and unemployment. When speaking to Lulu and Grace, who both worked in apparel stores, about this phenomenon, both commented that the pandemic made it apparent that businesses must have an online presence in order to remain financially viable.

But there is also exploitation, and this is the core of Lukács' examination of women's participation in Japan's digital economy. Lukács draws upon the examples of "girly" photographers, net idols, bloggers, amateur traders, and cell phone novelists to show how Japan's digital economy is built on women's invisible labor or feminized affective labor. As digital embeddedness and growing media convergence result in a renegotiation of the perceived boundaries of online/offline—and a doing away with these boundaries altogether—the boundaries of labor also become renegotiated. Lukács argues that the erosion of the "line between paid, visible labor and unpaid, invisible labor" is central to the generation of surplus in Japan's digital economy (19). Japan's digital economy, Lukács explains, not only reproduces longstanding inequalities in the labor market, but also advances the already precarious nature of the market by "extracting value from labor without entering into wage relationships with individuals" (163). We thus see that the digital is not always a source of opportunity for women, but rather can exacerbate already-existing inequities and disparities. Lukács' work does not approach labor within the context of (visual) participatory culture(s) of more recent SNS such as Instagram. However, her discussion can be extended to these digital platforms.⁵⁰ As demonstrated in the case study of *tabijeni* ambassadors introduced earlier in this chapter, users of SNS—especially those who participate in the visual participatory culture(s) of Instagram—(un)consciously provide labor.

The impacts of *instabae* and Instagram more broadly on local, regional, and national economies are undeniable. Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that these impacts incite mixed feelings among business owners and local communities. Some businesses very much cater to those

⁵⁰ We may also consider how Lukács' examination of feminized affective labor ties with discourse on platform capitalism within and beyond Japan. See Srnicek 2017 and Steinberg 2021.

in pursuit of *instabae* by offering aesthetically pleasing interiors and exteriors. In the case of dining establishments such as the cafes mentioned in the previous chapter, food options are also prepared and presented in a way that is ideal for photo-taking and photo-sharing. Furthermore, multiple businesses bear their own Instagram accounts and encourage patrons to follow their account or tag the account in any photos that they upload. At times, the act of following and tagging is incentivized, and patrons may even receive a discount on their purchase or meal. Patrons provide labor for businesses, either consciously or unconsciously. When visiting a Studio Ghibli-themed sweets shop in Shimokitazawa that was popular on Instagram, the owner of the shop, an elderly woman, mentioned to me that she was surprised at the sheer number of customers—including foreigners—that visit the shop on a daily basis. The shop is not only difficult to find, but it is also quite a walk from the train station. When visiting a strawberry-themed sweets shop located in the city of Atami within Shizuoka Prefecture, I learned from an employee that customers visited the shop from outside of the prefecture. Similarly, the shop was popular on Instagram and was also known by several of my interlocutors. The manager of a New York-themed café in Jiyūgaoka that had been spotlighted on Instagram by a food critic with a large following mentioned that he was pleased with the boost in customers that resulted from the food critic's post.

In drawing upon the examples of Instagram Lectures, self-help books, and the digital presence of businesses, I wish to illustrate that Instagram itself has become an economy. This is the same for other visual-centric SNS, such as TikTok and YouTube. Instagram can serve as a promising source of supplemental income in a precarious labor market. Businesses and individuals can also benefit from digital labor and amplification on the platform, as demonstrated in the examples of shops that are tagged as *instabae* by users. Presence on digital platforms such as Instagram is becoming a necessity for businesses—for better or for worse. The term “Insta-flies,” also pronounced as *instabae*, has emerged as a rebuttal to *instabae* culture. While bearing the same pronunciation, it is written differently, utilizing the katakana for “house fly” (ノエ) rather than the kanji for “to shine.” The term is clearly a jab at those participating in *instabae* culture, hinting that these participants are noisy and “swarm” around certain sites. A viral post by Twitter user

@ASTROONSEN originally posted in August 2017 featured a hand-drawn image of a green fly with square eyes bearing the fluorescent neon pink Instagram logo, along with a parody taxonomic definition of this “species” of fly:

Instabae are insects of the order *Diptera* (Flies) in the family *Instabae*. They prey on young women in their teens and 20s, and have become a serious issue in recent years as hygienic parasites that transmit many infectious diseases. They enjoy trendy sweets and Starbucks’ new treats.⁵¹

The core characteristics of Insta-flies center on gender, age, and enjoyment of certain trends. An image search of Insta-flies yields gendered images of flies wielding tapioca drinks—associated with high schoolers—and flies in bikinis with pursed lips tinted with rouge. While the notion of Insta-flies seems humorous, it has expanded into the realm of moral panic discourse. This is evident by the article by the conservative newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* highlighting the food waste that sometimes results when those pursuing *instabae* only seek to photograph food without actually consuming it. The article’s illustration features a frustrated chef looking at two young women whom are illustrated with ominous glaring eyes, cooing “So pretty!”. There is a strawberry parfait placed on the table behind the women, completely untouched. The young woman chef utters in response: “They’re barely eating it...is this for Insta?” (Sankei 2019).

The *Sankei Shimbun*’s depiction hinges on moral panic discourse and stereotypes regarding age and gender, entering the realm of ageism and misogyny. Indeed, this moral panic discourse is not unlike the discourse that centered on young *keitai* users’ lack of “manners” and ability to cultivate “acceptable” interpersonal relationships (Fujimoto 2005; Habuchi 2005; Matsuda 2005). However, the concern about waste and the impact of Instagram on clientele comfort was echoed by some restaurant owners. In several of our conversations, Hashimoto, the owner of an upscale British-style pub, recalled stories that had been told to him by fellow restaurant owners in which younger customers ordered dishes only for photographic purposes, rather than consumption. He

⁵¹ The original Tweet may be accessed via the following link:
<https://twitter.com/ASTROONSEN/status/898199716264951809>.

explained to me that he personally does not mind if his pub gains publicity online. His only concern would be the ability of younger customers to pay for their food or drinks, as the items on his menu are a bit pricey. Hashimoto has not established an online presence for his pub, with the exception of a private Facebook group for regulars. This hints towards a preference for intimate ambience with a loyal set of regular customers rather than a bustling onset of first-time customers. Throughout my fieldwork, several business owners, upon learning that I conduct research on SNS, often asked for my assistance in developing a digital presence for their business. Before agreeing, I would speak to these owners about the potential caveats of amplified digital presence—including the possibility of an overwhelming onslaught of customers. In tracking the economic impact of Instagram, it will be necessary to consider how the visuality of the platform plays a role in the amplification or exacerbation of local and regional economies.

Conclusion: Digital Corporeality

The circuitries of gendered worldmaking in 5G Japan are powered by undersea cables, the “Cloud,” the affordances of smartphones, and the affordances of SNS. Yet despite the “newness” and perceived divergences of these circuitries, there are continuities with historical and existing forms of gendered socialities and economies. In this chapter, I have illustrated change and continuity in social practices and consumerism among Japanese girls and women by revisiting previous literature centering on *keitai* culture, consumerism, and gendered sociality and introducing the case study of Instagram. I have highlighted continuities within media cultures, such as the social practices and bodily performances associated with *purikura* culture and *instabae* culture. Even if *instabae* loses its shine among users, it is likely that participatory culture on visual-centric SNS such as Instagram will continue in other forms. The dynamics present within *instabae* culture can be applicable to future digital technologies, practices, and visual representations. The dynamics embodied by *instabae* and other Instagram trends may be found in digital cultures elsewhere. A major goal of my research is to create space and opportunities for transnational considerations and collaborations centering on digital culture and digital ethnography, within and

beyond East Asia. A focus on Japan also offers an opportunity to highlight digital networks beyond the context of the United States—I have seen much literature on social media and smartphone usage that marks Western contexts as a “universal standard.” We see that SNS provides an opportunity to revisit theory and previous literature, along with the opportunity to integrate both transhistorical and transnational approaches.

Visual participatory culture is corporeal. It involves the documenting, uploading, and sharing of photographic subjects and bodies. It involves presence, as bodies physically travel through spaces and metaphorically traverse the ever-blurred boundaries of online/offline—a toggling, so to speak. The portable and connective affordances of the smartphone and SNS must not be underestimated throughout this toggling. The images and networks mediated via digital participatory cultures can grant insight into (gendered) worldmaking.

In this chapter, I have focused on the relationship between the digital and gendered worlds through the lens of play. However, this is not to disregard or negate the “dark side” of visual participatory culture, SNS, and smartphone usage. This includes cyberbullying and declining mental health, which I discuss in Chapter 4. This “dark side” also includes labor extraction and surveillance. Questions that remain beyond the scope of this chapter yet should be examined when considering gendered worldmaking and digital mediation include, but are not limited to, the following: Does the user truly control her own mediations once they are uploaded onto platforms? What should we make of situations in which engagement with participatory culture is framed as part of mainstream sociality, yet is actually part of an infrastructure of labor extraction? How should we approach the quantification of the body or self into a consumer datapoint, rather than an agentic user?

Future examinations of the intersections of gender, visual participatory cultures, and mediatic assemblages should highlight the agency of the user while also foregrounding infrastructures of capitalism, surveillance, and power. The digital can allow us to further examine these themes while also looking for moments of change and intervention corresponding with gendered spheres of sociality. Digital activism can constitute a site of inquiry. In the next chapter,

I examine how digital networks on SNS foster the development of solidarities, activism, and counterpublics in Japan.



Mediation: A Musical Interlude

NiziU is a Japanese pop group composed of nine young women. The group was formed as the culmination of a competition hosted by Sony Music and JYP Entertainment known as “Nizi Project,” which aimed to localize the booming Korean Pop (K-Pop) industry into Japan. NiziU would dominate the music billboard in Japan with hits such as “Make You Happy.”⁵² In 2020, the group would appear in the 71st edition of *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, an annual singing competition between male and female musicians that is broadcasted on New Year’s Eve, a mere 29 days after the release of their debut single “Step and a Step” (The First Times 2021). During the 72nd edition of *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, NiziU performed in the backdrop of the youth culture hub of Shibuya, selecting their song “Take a Picture” as their competition piece.

“Take a Picture” embodies the themes of iPhoneography, girlhood, and memory making. The music video begins with the nine women sneaking into a theme park at night, using their smartphone flashlights to navigate through the darkness.⁵³ The musical dance number begins, as the young women dance to the introductory verse:

*Wanna wanna wanna
Take a picture now, take a picture now
Gonna gonna gonna
Be unforgettable*

Throughout the song, the nine women dance in the backdrops of the theme park and bright, pastel-hued locations: whirling teacups, a diner, and a miniature broadcast station, to name a few. As NiziU performs their choreography, they sing of the joy of shared, intimate moments with a special

⁵² For further information about NiziU, see their official website: <https://niziU.com/s/n123/?ima=2222>.

⁵³ The full music video can be accessed via the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlHb1qH-zS4>.

someone. The song's hook is of particular interest, due to its emphasis on nostalgic youth and photography as a form of memorialization:

*One for our love
Two for our youth
Three for all these precious memories that we're making
Four for every smile
Five 'cause we're young and wild
Let's remember this forever*

The (smartphone) camera is present throughout the music video. It is present audibly through the insertion of shutter click sound effects throughout the music video. It is present lyrically through the description of capturing heartfelt moments via photography. Finally, it is present physically through the use of “selfie sticks,” the posing for “selfies,” and the pantomiming of the camera frame amongst the members of NiziU.

Photography, the smartphone, and social media have formed the theme of other pop songs performed by female musicians and musical groups. In May 2019, pop star and Harajuku icon Kyary Pamyu Pamyu (henceforth KPP) released the single “*Kimi ga ii ne kuretara* (Whenever You Give Me a Like).”⁵⁴ The music video begins with KPP, who has a braided beard adorned with bows, ruminating in a dreamy room.⁵⁵ She begins to sing:

*All alone in a corner of my room by myself
Just lost in thought about some meaningless things
Thinking “What if?”, you know, just daydreaming
It'd be too embarrassing if anyone could hear*

⁵⁴ For further information about Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, see her official website: <http://kyary.asobisystem.com/english/>.

⁵⁵ The full music video can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DitMqeKSP0>. The official music video bears English closed captions. While I have drawn upon these closed captions in the following translation of the lyrics, I have also included my own translations when these closed captions did not quite encapsulate the original Japanese lyrics.

The video transitions to an arcade combat game. KPP, transformed into a robot-like being, fights against 2D agents and figures who trouble her on a daily basis. As the fights ensue, she continues to sing:

*Are you fine being the same?
Even if you pursue mundane things
There is no guarantee that you can achieve them
So I'd rather be true
Even if I can't be sure*

KPP wins the fight after the last knockout. Her arcade persona looks towards the screen and smiles from the victory. KPP appears once again in her human form. The beat picks up before entering the chorus, and a lively choreography ensues as KPP sings:

*Whenever you give me a like
Whenever you give me a like
Losing control
About to overload my heart and soul

I don't want to separate from you
With all of my might
I want to shine for you
Even if you aren't next to me*

In the next narrative arc of the music video, KPP transforms from a human into a 3D avatar. She is sitting at a desk in a dark room—the only source of light within the room radiates from numerous large monitors. Each monitor projects images that embody certain genres of Instagram posts. Each genre is superimposed above the image in large white block text: RIP, text message, hot dog legs, food porn, meme, workout selfie, VIP lounge curry, and Reiwa post. KPP, in 3D avatar form, shakes her head and rolls her eyes in annoyance. She then picks up her smartphone and swipes her fingers across its screen to reveal a SNS post that she has composed. The post bears two selfies of human KPP—one that depicts a more natural persona and another that depicts her pop star persona. The images are accompanied by the following text in English: “Me vs. the girl they say I should worry about!”. The prompt “Swipe up to post” appears on her smartphone screen,

and KPP swipes her fingers upwards. The post then appears on the large monitors within the room. The following text in Japanese then appears as a subtitle: “*Jibun wa, jibun. Sore de yokunai?* (I am who I am. Isn’t that enough?)” KPP pumps her arms with excitement. Messages of support from her followers in English begin to flood the monitors:

Love it!
Timeless
Sick
Just be yourself
Best post on earth ❤️ ❤️ ❤️
AMAZING

Subtitles in Japanese embodying the overall affect of these English posts then appear at the bottom of the screen.

The popularity of “Take a Picture” and “*Kimi ga ii ne kuretara*” is undoubtedly due to their very catchy beats, memorable hooks, and aesthetically pleasing music videos. However, I would like to imagine that this popularity is also due to their embodiment of the themes of girlhood, nostalgic youth, iPhoneography, networked intimacy, and mediation of an (in)authentic self. This embodiment is made possible by a blending of visual, aural, and lyrical elements. I wonder how many listeners, particularly girls and women, felt seen and heard by NiziU and KPP. Perhaps NiziU’s song awakened a sense of longing for memories made and *to be* made with friends via the smartphone camera. Perhaps KPP’s song awakened a sense of connection—a realization that the pressure to mediate a *certain kind of self* is one that is felt and experienced even by pop stars.

Chapter Three

Not a Trend:

Digital Activism, Black Lives Matter, and Black Japanese Storytelling as Praxis

Mediation: “Racism is not a trend!”

Towards the end of my fieldwork, news hit Japan about the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd’s neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds on May 25th, 2020. As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests unfolded in the United States and worldwide during the summer of 2020, Grace, a Black Japanese woman in her mid-twenties, begins to share videos and images of the protests on her Instagram. Her phone calls to me become more frequent and unscheduled, as she wishes to express her pain and frustration. While this frustration is directed towards anti-Blackness and the violence enacted against Black people on a global scale, it is also directed towards her acquaintances from high school and college. As her posts about BLM became more frequent, these acquaintances responded to her via Direct Message (DM) with the claim that racism does not exist in Japan. Along with these acquaintances, she also noticed that there was a perception among Japanese users of Social Networking Services (SNS) that BLM was just another SNS “trend.” “Racism is not a trend!” Grace angrily exclaims to me over the phone one evening. And in radical opposition to these claims, Grace eventually begins to publicly share her own narratives of the racism she has experienced as a Black Japanese woman living in Japan.

In one post on her Instagram profile, Grace features ten screenshots of a series of paragraphs she had typed on the “Notes” application of her smartphone. These paragraphs constitute reflections on discrimination (*sabetsu*) in Japan. While initially reflecting broadly on discrimination as a category, Grace offers a more explicit lens on anti-Black racism in Japan. To highlight the pervasiveness of this issue, she shares several stories of anti-Black racism that she had encountered throughout her life. For example, Grace recounts that one teacher in her junior

high school, believing that her curly hair was a perm and thus against the school's hair code, forcibly dunked her head beneath a running faucet to "wash it out." Of course, Grace's hair stayed curly—it was *her natural hair*, after all. The teacher left without a word, leaving Grace dripping wet in front of the sink. Within her Instagram post, Grace also recalls the multiple times in which she has been judged for her "foreign" appearance, especially on public transportation. She recalls overhearing multiple individuals, upon seeing her seated on trains or buses, state: "There's a Black person!" or "There's an open seat there, but I don't want to sit next to a foreigner."

These posts offered a different angle of Grace's Instagram usage. In her entry interview several months before, she identified as an avid user of Instagram, enthusiastically speaking of its ability to inform and entertain. For example, Instagram was a useful tool as she was applying to jobs at apparel stores: as many apparel stores now bear their own Instagram accounts, she could visit each store's page to learn more about the business and read *kuchikomi*, or online reviews, posted by past and ongoing customers. With regards to entertainment, Grace enjoyed watching humorous videos on the platform whenever she was feeling under the weather. Furthermore, she enjoyed staying in touch with friends and receiving compliments on her posts.

Grace's identity figured into her usage in multiple ways. For Grace, Instagram also proved to be a means of meeting other *hāfu*, or mixed-race individuals.⁵⁶ The use of the term *hāfu* has been contested, due to its centering of a supposed "half" nature of identity. Others have instead advocated for terms such as *daburu* (double) or *mikkusu* (mixed). At the same time, some mixed-race individuals in Japan have also reclaimed the term *hāfu* as a denotation of comfort with their own identity, as an act of reclamation. Others, including Grace, have accepted the term and use it only because it is so widely used in Japanese society. Grace often adds identity markers as hashtags in her posts, such as #blasian. She recalled multiple times in which she met other *hāfu* by happenstance in Tokyo, and they recognized her from her public Instagram posts.

⁵⁶ Throughout this chapter I will use the term *hāfu* because of its ubiquity and use by Black Japanese interlocutors, although I acknowledge the issues surrounding the term.

She described this process as “the *hāfu* connection” (*hāfu tsunagari de*), and with her fingers mimicked bouncing from one account to the next.

Blackness, too, formed the core of Grace’s Instagram usage. While sitting in a booth at a *yakitori* restaurant several months before the events of May 2020, I watched as she scrolled through the “Explore” page of her Instagram. This page utilizes an algorithm to suggest posts that may pique the user’s interest based on their own patterns of engagement, including but not limited to the posts that they like and the pages that they follow. Grace’s suggested posts mostly included images of Black women, makeup tutorial videos, natural hairstyles, and dance videos. I asked Grace to characterize the types of accounts and posts with which she engages. She replies: “The things that make me happy!” She then lists: dogs, fashion, dance, and hair. Grace then proceeded to show me multiple Instagram profiles of dancers and curly haired Black women. We eventually looked at rapper Megan Thee Stallion’s Instagram, as we were both fans of her music and style. Grace marveled at Megan’s figure in each post, though mused aloud about some of her hairstyles: “Why doesn’t she wear her natural hair? I mean, laid looks nice, but...” Her voice trailed off. In response to this, I asked her if it was important for her to see Black musicians and celebrities with their natural hair. “Well, they have hair, so they should show it!” She replied emphatically.

Grace often humorously explained the irritation of receiving questions regarding her racial and ethnic identity on a daily basis. In response to such questions, Grace mentioned to me that she often wishes to exclaim aloud: “You’re the 500th person to ask!” As we are both “mixed” Black women (I am Black Dominican and white American, she is Black American and Japanese), Grace and I often spent hours exchanging stories of these humorous yet frustrating questions, as we were both curious as to how our experiences intersected despite our different backgrounds. At times I witnessed the questioning of Grace’s identity firsthand during in-person hangouts. When shopping together in Shimokitazawa one afternoon, the store’s cashier conversed with Grace before mentioning: “Your Japanese is so good! Have you been here for a long time?” Grace then responded: “I’ve been here my whole life (*zutto iru*)!” Afterwards, Grace

snickered outside of the shop. I recalled an earlier conversation I had with Grace, in which she shared her alternate response to the question of her “length of stay” in Japan: “Twenty-six years! From since I was in my mother’s belly!”

Although Grace often spoke of her experiences in a humorous tone, and often with a huge smile, this was ultimately a coping mechanism for some of her more disturbing experiences of bullying, discrimination, and loneliness. “I can’t take things seriously...if I did, I wouldn’t survive.” For the most part, Grace spoke of these experiences with me during in-person hangouts or whenever we spoke over the phone—these narratives did not make their way into her Instagram. That is, until the summer of 2020. Grace’s storytelling was her own contribution to antiracist activism in Japan and antiracist movements on a global, networked scale.



In *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan famously asserted that “the medium is the message” (1994[1964], 7). This provocation motivated scholars to study the medium through which content is transmitted. In the digital age, SNS have increasingly played a role in highlighting social and political issues. This is largely due to the affordances of SNS, as they facilitate dissemination of information on a wide scale and near-instantaneous rate. Furthermore, the “on-the-ground” use of SNS in documenting significant events, whether through livestreaming or rapid posting of textual accounts, can provide valuable information that supplements information provided by mainstream media—or even counteracts this information overall. The use of SNS in the context of social and political movements raises multiple questions. When do SNS become tools for social and political movements? Can SNS serve as sites of critical resistance through the sharing of deeply personal stories of injustice and systemic inequity? How can these stories educate audiences and confront longstanding misconceptions in society? In what ways can SNS be harmful to movements via the misuse and abuse of their affordances?

In previous chapters, I have focused on SNS as tools for communication and convenience, as mediating devices in intimacy and sociality, as sources of entertainment, and even as objects of moral panic. In this chapter I focus on SNS usage in the context of social and political movements, with a particular eye on the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations that took place following the murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020.⁵⁷ I highlight the reception of BLM in Japan and representations of the demonstrations in Japanese mainstream media. Such (mis)representations, like many circulated in global mainstream media, featured a hyper-fixation on the destruction of property and misinformed explanations of the situation in the United States—explanations that failed to take into account the long history of racism and violence against Black people. SNS, in particular Twitter and Instagram, played a significant role in offering different angles of the demonstrations. The use of SNS by Black Japanese users was especially impactful, as this usage often involved the sharing of personal experiences of anti-Black racism as a way of educating Japanese friends and followers on the dimensions of racism in Japan and the significance of the BLM movement. I suggest that acts of storytelling by Black Japanese SNS users may be considered to be a form of intervention and resistance.⁵⁸ In this context, this storytelling aims to contest racialized stereotypes, address misunderstandings of BLM in Japan, and raise awareness of the racism experienced by Black people in Japan—ultimately, this storytelling constitutes an intervention against the perception that racism does not exist in Japan.

First, I map out a genealogy of several major digital activist movements that have taken place since March 11th, 2011, which is perceived by scholars as a turning point in the use of SNS

⁵⁷ Scholars such as Florini (2019) have issued a preference in using the terminology “the Movement for Black Lives” rather than “Black Lives Matter” in referring to the ongoing movement against anti-Black racism and violence. This is largely an effort to distinguish from the official organization known as “Black Lives Matter” (28-29). In this chapter, I decide to use “Black Lives Matter” despite this nuance, as this terminology was used among Black Japanese interlocutors and Japanese media.

⁵⁸ I wish to emphasize that the opinions and narratives within this chapter are not representative of all Black Japanese individuals.

in activism in Japan.⁵⁹ These movements include the #MeToo and #KuToo movements, Twitter demonstrations against the Japanese government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fostering of online solidarity and sociality via the digitization of the Women's March Tokyo 2020 and Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2020. I discuss the features of SNS usage in Japan that have potentially contributed to the rise of digital activism. I then delve into the case study of BLM in Japan, featuring the interventions made by Black Japanese users of SNS, particularly Twitter and Instagram, against misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the movement.⁶⁰ I discuss three complex dynamics that potentially instigated such misunderstandings: the perception of SNS as sites of entertainment or performativity influenced by media ideologies and imagined affordances, a sense of distance from the movement due to concentrated media coverage of the United States ("there" not "here"), and the imagination of Japan as exempt from issues of racism and anti-Blackness. I then conclude with a call for an inclusion of Japan in the growing literature on Black digital networks and counterpublics.

Scholars have discussed the caveats of centering interpersonal aspects of racism at the expense of its structural or institutional components—and vice versa (Rosa and Díaz 2019; Sterling 2010). In this chapter, I strive to reach a balance by discussing racism in the context of the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes, violent and discriminatory acts and words directed towards perceived racial and ethnic "others," and the act of othering—all of which must be contextualized in a history of racialized stereotypes in Japan and narrative discourse of Japan as "homogeneous" (Befu 2001; Oguma 2002[1995]; Russell 2020; Shin 2010). I also include Sterling's (2010) discussion of structural racism as "racialized people's structurally facilitated inability to complexly represent themselves as full human beings" (27). By using storytelling to speak against racialized stereotypes, media misrepresentations of BLM, and the perception of

⁵⁹ The list of digital activist movements within this chapter is not exhaustive. The difficulty of the digital is its vastness, so there are likely movements that have slipped my analysis. However, I hope that my analysis fosters further discussion of digital activism in Japan.

⁶⁰ The interconnectedness of SNS means that the boundaries between platforms such as Twitter and Instagram become blurred. As such, while I focus on particular posts or accounts on either Twitter or Instagram, it should be noted that these posts or accounts may exist on *both*.

Japan as devoid of racism, I suggest that Black Japanese users of SNS are seeking to *reclaim* agency in the representation of their identity and lived experience—and thus combat racism.

Digital Activism in Post-3.11 Japan

When do SNS become tools for social and political movements? Notable studies of digital activism in Japan and the circulation of personal narratives online have centered on the Triple Disaster of March 11th, 2011, also known as 3.11. Japan is disaster-prone due to its geographic location on tectonic plates. Visual and networked media have long played a key role in the reporting of past disasters in Japan, evident in the circulation of postcards depicting the damage inflicted by the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 and the use of PC networks to share narratives of the Kobe Earthquake of 1995 (Hjorth and Kim 2011; Weisenfeld 2012). 3.11, however, was unprecedented in two major ways. First, the extent of the disaster involved the catastrophic trifecta of a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, a tsunami, and the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. Second, 3.11 was fully covered on SNS, beginning with the circulation of warnings regarding the first quakes to the ensuing social and civic responses to the Japanese government's handling of the disaster (Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand 2012). Shortly after the disaster, cell phone transmitters became inundated with calls, leading to massive call failures. SNS such as Twitter and Mixi thus served as key tools in confirming the safety of loved ones and acquaintances. Furthermore, SNS served as key sources of information, at times supplemental to or in dialogue with broadcast media, and as valuable spaces for the affective exchange of personal narratives and emotions related to the disaster (Hjorth and Kim 2011; Petrovic 2019; Petrovic 2020; Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand 2012).

Scholars of digital studies in the context of 3.11 have demonstrated keen interest in the transformative potential of SNS as a tool in voicing political and social critique. Petrovic (2020) suggests that distrust in the mass media was triggered by the ambiguous coverage of the nuclear meltdown, which included “poorly communicated information on levels of radiation, the

censoring of information on the nuclear meltdown, and the propaganda that the situation is under control” (10). Media distrust combined with public frustration with the government’s response to the disaster ultimately impacted SNS usage. Users utilized platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and blogs to “crowdsource” information in the wake of media distrust, critique the government’s response to the disaster, and mobilize anti-nuclear demonstrations (Liscutin 2011; Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand 2012, 17-20). Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand (2012) suggest that this post-3.11 political engagement can be attributed in some part to the ability of SNS to recruit individuals around “explicitly oppositional and political causes” and establish “connections among already organized groups in common causes” (22).

The impact of 3.11 is evident in the memorial events that have taken place both online and offline since the disaster. On March 11th, 2020, #9 years since the Great East Japan Earthquake (#東日本大震災から 9 年; #Higashi Nihon Daishinsai kara kyūnen) and #Great East Japan Earthquake (#東日本大震災; #Higashi Nihon Daishinsai) were trending on Twitter. Tweets that bore the hashtag largely featured personal anecdotes of that unforgettable day. Such anecdotes also featured deep reflection, as evident in one user’s reminder that “tomorrow is never promised”. Twitter usage on this day involved the retweeting of content from newsreels and news articles commemorating the event. One trending news article documented the appearance of a rainbow over the 3.11 memorial park in Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture at around 2:46 PM—the same time in which the earthquake hit the region nine years ago.⁶¹ The digital memorialization of 3.11 demonstrates the capacity of SNS as digital artifacts, as spaces of oral history and affective exchange. This was especially the case during the ten-year anniversary of the disaster, also memorialized online on March 11th, 2021.

The impact of 3.11 was also a digital one, triggering the development of new platforms and budding forms of digital engagement. LINE, the most-widely used messaging platform in Japan, was developed shortly after 3.11. The introduction of LINE to Japan’s mediascape was

⁶¹ A news outlet, Kobe Shimbun NEXT, was also trending due to its coverage of the rainbow. The short article can be found here: <https://www.kobe-np.co.jp/news/sougou/202003/0013184622.shtml>.

largely a response to the massive call failures that took place during the disaster and subsequent reliance on SNS to connect with loved ones and acquaintances (Ohashi, Kato, and Hjorth 2017, 5-6; Steinberg 2020, 4). With regards to SNS usage, Petrovic (2019) explains that the digital sociality during and following the disaster marked a shift from “private, one-on-one communication supported by homegrown social media platforms” to “the more open and group-oriented online communication fostered by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube” (92). Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand (2012) postulate that the critical, political, and activist engagement with SNS since 3.11 has fostered “a new generation of social media users”: one willing to engage in political critique and alternative political movements. At the time of their writing, the authors cautioned that the full impact of this engagement with SNS had yet to be seen—more specifically, it was not yet clear if this engagement could serve as fodder for future movements (25). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 would demonstrate that the public had indeed learned from 3.11.

Similar to 3.11, SNS would serve as a source of information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and infection rates in Tokyo. Mass media coverage of the pandemic was met with distrust by many Japanese individuals, undoubtedly a lingering effect of public distrust in the media following 3.11 (Petrovic 2020). One interlocutor, Akiko, explained that she found reports by the mass media to be *usokusai*, or dubious—she believed that the government was downplaying the true extent of the pandemic in order to host the Olympics.⁶² Instead, Akiko relied on Twitter and information circulated by her acquaintances in their LINE group chat.⁶³ Public frustration with the government’s response to the pandemic was also reflected in the numerous “Twitter demos” that took place in the ensuing months.⁶⁴ Two notable Twitter demos included the #Quarantine and benefits should be a set (#自粛と給付はセットだろ; #Jishuku to

⁶² It is important to note that the literal translation of *usokusai* is “smells like a lie.”

⁶³ While the circulation of information within social circles fosters a sense of comradery and mutual protection, there is also the very real risk of the accidental spread of misinformation and disinformation.

⁶⁴ These online demonstrations involved massive instantaneous posting of a particular hashtag on a set day and time frame. These posts may also incorporate banners and textual narratives related to the message of the demonstration.

kyūfu wa setto daro) demo on March 29th and the #Abe Resign (#安倍はやめろ; #Abe wa yamero) demo on May 2nd. Both demos took place for two hours in the evening, beginning at 8 PM. Twitter users voiced their frustrations with the government's inadequate response to the pandemic, ranging from lack of financial support to the implementation of questionable measures such as the distribution of two cloth masks per household.

The post-3.11 digital sphere has also seen a wealth of digital activism outside of the context of disaster, embodied by social and political engagement in both global and national movements. Discussions of digital activism in post-3.11 Japan must not neglect the localization of global feminist movements, in particular the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement aims to shed light on sexual violence and gender-based violence in society, along with the injustices faced by survivors of violence as they come forward with their stories. Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020) explain that the #MeToo movement is notable in that it existed as an activist campaign before the birth of the actual hashtag. The campaign was initiated by Tarana Burke in 2007 to provide a network for survivors involving the exchange of support and narratives. In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano utilized the hashtag #MeToo in response to sexual violence in Hollywood, particularly the violence perpetrated by producer Harvey Weinstein. Milano's celebrity status facilitated the rapid retweeting, liking, and posting of #MeToo by Twitter users, ultimately leading to the growth of the movement on a massive scale. While this rapid spread through Milano's network raises important questions regarding race, privilege, and the erasure of Black activists such as Tarana Burke, Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles agree that the success of the #MeToo movement as a hashtag could not have taken place without previous uses of Twitter in bringing attention to issues of gendered violence (24-29).

The issues that form the core of the #MeToo movement long existed in Japan. However, such issues became especially prevalent in the coverage of Itō Shiori. Itō, a journalist, was raped in 2015 by Yamaguchi Noriyuki, a former Washington bureau chief of Tokyo Broadcasting System Television, Inc. and biographer of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. In her memoir, Itō describes the assault along with the ensuing trauma of reporting the assault to authorities. She

recounts that the prosecutor told her that her case was a “black box” (Itō 2017, 2). Despite this, Itō pushed forward with seeking justice by going public with her account in 2017, ultimately becoming the face of the #MeToo movement. In a victory that is rare for many survivors of sexual assault, Itō would later win her lawsuit filed against Yamaguchi in 2019 (Osumi 2019).

The localization of the #MeToo movement, also known as #WithYou, is also evident in the Flower Demos that take place on the 11th of each month, beginning on April 11th, 2019.⁶⁵ The first Flower Demo took place in Tokyo and Osaka, as participants—survivors of sexual assault and allies—shared narratives and messages regarding sexual violence in Japan. Since the first demo, participants hold flowers to embody the solidarity of #WithYou (Kitahara 2020, 9-17). There is also the #KuToo movement, initiated by Ishikawa Yumi to protest the mandatory requirement for women to wear heels and pumps in the workplace. The name of the movement is a play on the words “shoe” (*kutsu*) and “pain” (*kutsū*), and draws upon the feminism embodied by the #MeToo movement. Ishikawa first took to Twitter on January 1st, 2019 to vent about the discomfort of heels and sustaining injuries, while men are able to wear flat shoes.⁶⁶ Ishikawa’s Tweet became viral, as many agreed with her stance and shared her pain. Ishikawa eventually submitted a Change.org petition to the Ministry of Labour, Health, and Welfare (MHLW) calling for an end to this mandatory dress code, as it embodies a form of gender discrimination and health hazard (Ishikawa 2019, 16-56). #KuToo has made an impact on Japanese workplaces, as evident by Japan Airlines’ (JAL) decision to ban the requirement for heels and pumps among cabin attendants and ground staff on March 23rd, 2020 (Takeshita 2020). Since the rise of the

⁶⁵ Feminist interlocutors postulated that this terminology was adopted to facilitate solidarity, as #MeToo felt isolating to some survivors — the use of “Me” seemed to center the individual, which added a sense of pressure. This postulation should not be taken as an answer, though is of interest in considering the localization of global movements. Feminist activist Kitahara Minori has also spoke of the adoption of #WithYou from the #MeToo movement in South Korea. Kitahara (2020) also discusses #WithYou as embodying the act of believing survivors and cultivating a safe space in which they can speak (11).

⁶⁶ The original Tweet can be found here:

https://twitter.com/ishikawa_yumi/status/1088410213105917952.

#MeToo movement, there has been a stronger presence of feminists and feminist organizations on Japanese Twitter advocating for causes such as emergency contraception accessibility.⁶⁷

SNS have also served as spaces for parades and marches centering on social movements. The Women's March Tokyo 2020 was originally scheduled for March 8th, 2020, in celebration of International Day of Women. While the physical march was cancelled due to COVID-19, it was celebrated as a virtual march. On March 3rd, The Women's March Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee suggested that users virtually participate by writing a message in response to the theme, "What you wish to express the most now", and posting the image on SNS under the hashtag #March at home 0308 (#おうちでマーチ 0308; #*Ouchi de māchi 0308*) (The Women's March Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee 2020). On the day of the march, posts that bore these hashtags expressed deep support for gender equity and LGBTQIA+ rights worldwide through the use of textual narratives and photographs of messages written on signs. Similarly, Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2020, a parade celebrating the queer community in Tokyo, was scheduled to physically take place on April 26th, 2020 yet transformed into a virtual event due to the circumstances of COVID-19. This virtual transition ultimately expanded participation, facilitating accessibility for those with disabilities, those abroad, those living outside of Tokyo, and those who could only attend anonymously due to safety concerns and fear of "outing." The Tokyo Rainbow Pride committee recommended that participants post "pride messages" on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, along with posts embodying the theme of the parade: "Your happiness is my happiness." Furthermore, the Committee recommended that such posts should include the hashtags #TRP2020 and #Pride at home (#おうちでプライド; #*Ouchi de puraido*), and should be published between 1 PM and 3 PM on April 26th (Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2020).

The aforementioned movements demonstrate that the digital can prove to be significant for the amplification of myriad political and social issues. The pervasive use of SNS as tools for activism can be attributed to the affordances of these digital platforms. With regards to activism,

⁶⁷ This cause is embodied by *Nande naino?* (@nandenaino_), an organization fighting for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in Japan.

we see that the hashtag (#) function, which Bonilla and Rosa (2015) characterize as a clerical and semiotic “indexing system”, has played a significant role (5). Hashtags embody the affordances of persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability (boyd 2014, 10-11). Hashtags denote a particular topic, message, or slogan that can easily be attached to posts, shared, and searched. Hashtags and their corresponding algorithms also “suggest” potential connections and shared interests, though do not necessarily force the user to engage with or pursue these connections (Cotter 2019). Yet when users do engage, movements may result. Activist movements have persisted in memory and ongoing social discourse as hashtags, evident in the examples of #MeToo and #KuToo. It is thus unsurprising that the term “hashtag activism” has been adopted into vernacular usage (Jackson, Bailey, Foucault Welles 2020, xxxii). Hashtags are thus citational, indexical, and symbolic (Nakassis 2012; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Jackson, Bailey, Foucault Welles 2020).

Livestreams and live postings have also formed the crux of digital activism. According to Marriott (2007), live television eradicates the restraints of space and place, offering a mode of communication that is “instantaneous or near-instantaneous” and causes the “elsewheres” of viewers and listeners to co-exist — a dynamic we also see in SNS livestreaming (27). The “live” nature of livestreaming is a stark contrast to the temporality of televised news features. Lefebvre (2004) states that the controlled temporality of news features constitutes a form of commodification. Indeed, media outlets strategically broadcast their news features in accordance to the daily rhythms of viewers’ lives (48). Activist livestreaming differs from this controlled temporality in that it is a form of “real-time” and “on-the-ground” documentation at the hands of the *user*. Livestreaming is an embodiment of witnessing and reporting, and its nature as a form of “unmediated” or “unfiltered” documentation grants it an intimate and visceral air (Tufekci 2017, xxv). Such documentation may highlight an act of violence occurring instantaneously near the user, or a significant event in which the user is participating (for example, a march). It is worth noting that such livestreaming is often unscheduled, and highlights incidents, narratives, or perspectives that may be censored by mainstream media. Activist livestreaming constitutes a

stark contrast to the polyrhythmic nature of the media day that is commodified and controlled by media outlets.

The affordances used for activist movements can also be used *against* those same movements. SNS can just as easily spread messages of nationalist and hate rhetoric, along with misinformation and disinformation. As Han (2017) describes, the affordance of anonymity is also wielded by some SNS users as a form of power, creating “shitstorms” through incessant arguments that cannot be traced to a particular individual (2-3). Recall the revelation made by the 2014 survey conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC): over 70% of Japanese users of Twitter use anonymous accounts and more than half of these users recognize that they may be identified even when using Twitter anonymously (MIC 2014, 292-94). Activists on Japanese Twitter have faced much harassment (*hibōchūshō*) from users anonymous and otherwise. Similar to many survivors who have come forward with stories of sexual assault and have denounced patriarchal norms, Itō has received backlash online for her bravery, constituting a second rape.⁶⁸ Cartoonist Hasumi Yoshiko posted a series of defamatory comics on Twitter depicting Itō as wishing to engage the trading of sexual favors for career advancement (*makura eigyō*) and filing a false rape claim against Yamaguchi. The comics also depicted Itō’s memoir, *Black Box*, as a “hoax” (*decchi age*). On June 8th, 2020, Itō sued Hasumi for defamation, along with others who had facilitated the spread of the comics (Nakamura 2020; Nakamura and Konishi 2019). Feminists on Twitter rushed to support Itō’s decision, causing the hashtag #I support Itō Shiori (#わたしは伊藤詩織氏を支持します; #*Watashi wa Itō Shiori shi o shiji shimasu*) to climb the “Trending” list on Japanese Twitter.

Examinations of digital activism should also move beyond technical affordances to consider the imagined affordances and media ideologies that encapsulate particular SNS in a given context. As I have previously outlined, Nagy and Neff (2015) characterize imagined affordances as the expectations and perceptions that users have of certain technologies that “in

⁶⁸ Second rape refers to the reliving of the trauma of sexual assault in myriad forms, ranging from the constant retelling of the account of the assault to the backlash experienced upon coming forward.

effect and practice, shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested” (5). Similarly, media ideologies, which Gershon (2010) defines as “a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning,” emerge from how users perceive a certain medium, often vis-à-vis other media (3). The synergy of imagined affordances and media ideologies was evident in interlocutors’ responses to my interview questions: Japanese Twitter was narrated as the “dark side” of the Internet due to anonymous users and cyberbullying yet is also a valuable source of information, Instagram was narrated as a source of information and means of staying in touch with acquaintances, and TikTok was narrated as a tool to “kill time” (*himatsubushi*). When considering digital activism in the context of Japan, these narrations and imaginations of particular platforms must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, Japan’s high rate of ownership of mobile camera phones equipped with Internet capacity and prevalent media convergence must also be noted (Ito 2005; Hjorth and Kim 2011; Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand 2012; Galbraith and Karlin 2016). Finally, the particular “moment” in which digital activism is taking place must be considered. For example, in the case of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the digital became *the* medium for activism.

We see that digital movements have taken place in Japan with regards to issues of gender, sexuality, policy, and politics. What can be said for digital activism in response to issues of race, ethnicity, and injustice? In the next section, I highlight an ongoing global movement that gained attention in Japan during my fieldwork: Black Lives Matter (BLM).

Black Lives Matter and Media (Mis)Representations in Japan

The centrality of the digital to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has captured the attention of scholars. The message of the movement, namely the necessity to protect Black lives against police brutality, violence, and racism, has long been pertinent even before the creation of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. The hashtag itself came into existence after the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, at the hands of George Zimmerman. In response to

Zimmerman's later acquittal, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (Florini 2019, 22). #BlackLivesMatter has become a rallying hashtag in digital activism against anti-Black racism and violence, signifying the vital role of digital platforms in the movement.

Bonilla and Rosa (2015) delve into the shared temporality afforded by Twitter during the demonstrations that took place in Ferguson, Missouri following the 2014 murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by police officer Darren Wilson. This shared temporality was facilitated by the use of the hashtag. #Ferguson became a "mediatized place" on Twitter that facilitated rapid retrieval and transmission of information related to the demonstrations, along with the sharing of dialogue regarding deep-seated issues of racial injustice (6). Furthermore, #Ferguson and related hashtag campaigns, such as #HandsUpDontShoot, functioned as protests against police brutality *and* both media misrepresentations of and stereotypes directed against Black people. Participation in these campaigns through the sharing of personal narratives or use of meaningful visuals constituted activist acts of solidarity (8-9). #Ferguson demonstrates that hashtag activism and the use of SNS in addressing racism and injustice should not be underestimated. Bonilla and Rosa highlight the importance of SNS in activist movements, past, present, and future:

For, although Twitter activism is said to be fleeting by nature, it is also inherently aggregative. It is thus important to recognize that the reactions to the death of Michael Brown did not spark in a vacuum; they were fueled by accumulated frustrations over previously mediatized moments of injustice and guided by previous digital campaigns. (9-10)

The aggregative nature of digital movements was highlighted in the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd. A video recorded by witness Darnella Frazier was circulated on SNS of Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck—Floyd's cries and pleas could be heard vividly, yet Chauvin continues to kneel. Floyd's murder and the murder of countless other Black Americans triggered nationwide and global protests. News of the murder and the ensuing demonstrations reached Japan, nearly 6,000 miles away.

As I watched broadcasts of the protests on Japanese media, I noticed that both the images and the narrations by newscasters focused on the destruction of private property rather than the systemic racism and ruthless murder of Black lives that jumpstarted the protests in the first place. I would later learn that this was not unlike the media coverage taking place *within* the United States. Nevertheless, such coverage had an impact on the overall impression of the protests. On June 7th, 2020, the *Nippon Hōsō Kyokai* (NHK), one of Japan's leading broadcasters, aired a 26-minute segment on the BLM protests. This segment was part of an international affairs program directed towards a younger audience, titled *Kore de Wakatta! Sekai no Ima* (*Now I Understand! The World Today*). I was exposed to the segment via the circulation of its controversial animated video clip on Twitter. In the clip, an animated muscular Black man with cornrows strangles a coin purse as he angrily speaks of economic disparity experienced by Black Americans, especially in the backdrop of COVID-19. Russell (2020) offers a vivid description of the clip:

In the controversial clip, a mob of angry black people linger in the street as a dandyish black man sits atop a fire hydrant strumming a guitar. A muscular black man in a wife-beater T-shirt looms into view, exploding in anger as he recites in deep guttural tones the vast economic disparity between black and white America. Behind him, black men and women stomp their feet, little animated dust clouds appearing at their heels, and raise their arms in protest against America's socio-economic injustice. The clip ends with the blacks looting. (Russell 2020, 1)

The clip, which heavily relied on caricatures and stereotypes of Blackness — particularly Black masculinity — was a shock to the system. I was able to save the clip onto my computer and capture screenshots of the NHK's original Tweet before it was deleted by the NHK. While removed from the NHK's Twitter account and homepage, the original video clip has still survived online due to circulation by users, perhaps to the chagrin of the NHK.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ A prominent example is the uploading of the video clip onto YouTube by Canadian comedian JJ Walters, which can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqmII4DuJO0&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=JJWalter. This raises interesting questions regarding accountability, media archaeology, and the Internet as archive.



Figure 3.1: Screenshot of the (now deleted) NHK Tweet bearing the controversial animated clip.
Caption: “I will explain the disparity between America’s whites and Blacks. #America #ProtestDemos #TheWorldToday #Sekaima #InternationalNews #Anime [globe emoji]”

The entire segment focused on the “violent” nature of the riots rather than the murder of George Floyd and ongoing police brutality (Russell 2020, 1-2; Takeda 2020, 3-4).⁷⁰ The circulation of the *Sekai no Ima* animated clip on Twitter and the ensuing criticism serve as one case study of the digital localization of the Black Lives Matter movement in Japan. There were moments in which BLM was highlighted on Japanese Twitter and other SNS, such as the BLM marches that took place in Tokyo and Osaka on June 14th and June 7th, respectively.⁷¹ While these marches succeeded in bringing attention to anti-Black racism within and beyond Japan, the marches also faced backlash on Japanese SNS, including critiques centering on safety risks during the pandemic and assertions that BLM was “an American issue” (Rich and Hida 2020). Such assertions also coalesce with historical narratives of Japan as racially and ethnically “homogeneous” (Befu 2001; Oguma 2002[1995]).

The complicated responses in Japan to the BLM movement raise the question: in what ways can activists amplify the movement during a global pandemic, combat media misrepresentations, and combat the imagination of BLM as only an American issue? Here, we

⁷⁰ Takeda (2020) offers a detailed explanation of the segment and a timeline of the fallout that ensued.

⁷¹ SNS undoubtedly played a role in mobilizing for the marches. While discussion of the in-person marches that took place in Japan is beyond the scope of this chapter, the current literature would benefit from a future examination of the use of SNS by organizers and participants.

return to digital activism: particularly among Black Japanese users of SNS, who are keenly aware that anti-Black racism is also an issue relevant to Japan. In the case of digital activism, we must recall that digital movements do not occur in a vacuum. Black Japanese storytelling is a testimony of growing dissent against racial and ethnic narratives that are not only incorrect, but also erase and deny particular lived experiences. Furthermore, these acts of storytelling are also taking place in a post-3.11 lineage characterized by media distrust and growing reliance on crowdsourced information and narratives. To return to McLuhan's assertion of the medium is the message, perhaps we may consider how the *individual*—including their stories—becomes the message. As Tufekci (2017) states, activists can “act as their own media” in digital landscapes (xxvi). Here, we may consider the shift in positionality that accompanies the shift from “traditional” media such as television to SNS: namely, the shift of the individual as a passive receiver of information to an active producer of information. Storytelling as praxis constitutes an entry point of analysis.

Beyond Trending: Storytelling as Antiracist Pedagogy

Grace

Grace was born to a Black American mother and Japanese father in a rural prefecture in northeastern Japan. As demonstrated within the mediation at the start of this chapter, my conversations with Grace centered on her usage of Instagram as a source of entertainment. Blackness was also at the core of her usage, as she enjoyed following Black entertainers and other Black Japanese users of Instagram. However, the resurgence of the BLM protests in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd motivated Grace to use her own Instagram as a platform to spread awareness about BLM and anti-Black racism—including the racism that she has experienced in Japan.

Grace began to contact me more frequently as the protests unfolded. In her messages, Grace spoke of the pain she felt upon seeing the violent imagery of protestors being assaulted by

police officers during the demonstrations. We spoke over message and audio call, sharing our thoughts and pain about the situation in the United States. I soon began to notice that Grace began to use Instagram to share her thoughts. Within her Instagram Stories, which often took the form of video narrations recorded during her lunch break at work, Grace emphasized shared humanity and the importance of “spreading love, not hate.” In her first series of videos, she brings in her own positionality as a Black Japanese woman when speaking about the pain she feels regarding anti-Black racism and violence:

I’m half Asian, half Black. I’m a Japanese-American *hāfu*. So I have a lot of thoughts about this. And when you ask why, it’s because the issue in America is that Black people are getting targeted and killed. I want to think “I don’t live in America, I live in Japan so I’m safe!” But I can’t. It hurts so much to see Black people getting beat, killed...looked at with harsh looks. It absolutely hurts.

“What’s happening now is not ‘somebody else’s problem’ (*taningoto*),” Grace continues. She urges her viewers to imagine what they would do if they experienced such violence, or if their loved ones were killed. She concludes with a call for her viewers to carefully consider their words and actions, and to speak and act with reciprocity in mind.

Upon seeing Grace’s first series of videos, I sent her a message stating that her message is very important, that people need to know about these experiences, and that I hope she gets enough rest. In response, she messaged me the next day: “I needed to speak out!!!” Grace called me later that day to share the positive responses that she received, including messages from viewers stating that they will amend how they act and spread her message to others. When I asked Grace how she felt about these messages, she responded: “I’m so happy!” However, not all of the responses that Grace received were validating. As the week progressed, Grace spoke to me of the responses that she received from colleagues, former classmates, and followers about her experiences that demonstrated a lack of understanding (*rikairyoku ga asai*) and empathy. She also spoke of these responses in her near-daily narrations on her Instagram Stories. In one video, Grace spoke of the confusion she felt upon receiving a reply from a user that stated: “I don’t

think that there is discrimination in Japan.” Grace explained that she had to stop and think about this response, and realized that the user most likely reached this conclusion because they have not experienced discrimination, have not discriminated others, and have not witnessed discrimination. In another video, Grace spoke of her frustration upon hearing a work colleague state the following: “Whenever I open SNS, it’s discrimination this, discrimination that...I want this trend to be over soon. How long is it going to continue? Everyone is so quick to jump onto trends.” Grace recalled her internal thought process: “This is not a trend!” However, she remained silent, as she did not wish to argue with her colleague. In this video series, Grace’s conflicted feelings about remaining silent were visible in her body language and musings. She wondered aloud how an individual could possibly see videos of police brutality and not feel *anything* in response.

Throughout her multiple Instagram Stories addressing BLM, Grace discusses her resolve to amplify the movement through continuous posting while also encouraging her followers to do the same. In one video, Grace commented that her followers’ act of sharing her own videos has resulted in strangers contacting her with words of thanks — thus, one small act of sharing resulted in the spreading of awareness (*chotto shita kōdō de rikai ga hiromaru*). In this same video, she encourages her followers to also act: “If you have your own thoughts, I want you to put them into words and put them out there...if you don’t say anything or do anything, I think that’s the same as turning a blind eye to the issue (*mite minufuri*).” This statement highlights accountability in the age of SNS, a call to engagement following exposure to a message or issue.

Stories are ephemeral, only visible for 24 hours. Grace complemented her Stories with textual narratives posted on her Instagram profile. These posts involved images of paragraphs she had prepared beforehand, featuring descriptions of instances of discrimination that she has faced in Japan as someone who is mixed-race, ranging from comments on her physical appearance to individuals’ reluctance to sit next to her on the train. Grace had relayed some of these stories to me during interviews and casual conversations, though I had never seen her discuss these experiences on SNS. By sharing her personal anecdotes on both Instagram Stories

and regular posts, Grace essentially paired Instagram's affordances to further amplify her messages regarding global anti-Black racism.

Joel

Joel is a college student born and raised in Tokyo. Joel made an interesting reference to his Japanese-Guyanese identity when first introducing himself to me over video interview: "I'm from Japan, even though I don't look like I'm from Japan." Joel had spoken to me of his general SNS usage in his entry interview, mentioning his enjoyment of prank videos on TikTok and perusing stories on Instagram. He uses WhatsApp to stay in touch with his family members in the United States, including his father. "My dad is living in America now to earn money, because he didn't really get a good job in Japan...he was trying, but the racism thing is going on in Japan too, even though people can't see it in the surface, but it's in the core," he explained, referring to the discrimination that his Guyanese father experienced in Japan.

Joel had experienced bullying as a child, along with incessant questions regarding his background. In kindergarten, he explained that he was frequently called "gorilla" or "Obama." While he joked that being called Obama made him feel presidential, he also explained the complexity of his childhood experiences:

But as a kid I didn't really feel good, of course. In Japan, if you're *hāfu*, you don't have to be Black or white, the fact that you're *hāfu* is just being different from Japanese, so you're gonna get bullied. If you look different, you're gonna get bullied. As I grew up I felt kind of discriminated against just because I'm Black. But I got used to it.

Joel explained that as a child, he had been frequently asked if he was from Africa. When responding that he is from Japan, this response was met with such confusion to the extent that he felt pressured to identify as American. However, this identification also led to some confusion, as he did not speak much English.⁷² Thus, Joel came to identify as "half Japanese, half American." He feels that the questions regarding his identity have become less frequent, due to

⁷² The expectation that he, as someone who was "half American," should speak English would eventually lead Joel to study English in the United States for one year as a teen.

the prevalence of *hāfu* in Japanese society and *hāfu tarento* on television.⁷³ Joel mentioned that he had come to terms with the staring that he still receives on a daily basis, although he feels that such staring is due to Japanese individuals' negative image of Black people.

For Joel, the positive feature of SNS was the prevalence of information. While false information was also part of the picture, Joel mentioned that with adequate media literacy, one could discern false information from accurate information. He explained that SNS such as Instagram and TikTok had been influential in spreading information about BLM in Japan. "I don't think it would go this viral if there were no SNS. 'Cause...the source of knowing that news is only TV and newspapers and stuff, and the youth of Japan definitely wouldn't even know that BLM exists," he explained. Joel's engagement with BLM involved attending an online lecture about the movement, along with an examination of dynamics of race in Japan. On SNS, Joel indicated that he wished to amplify BLM in a way that reminded others that this was not just a fleeting "moment":

On SNS, one of my friends made this website for BLM and asked us to spread it. But I haven't done it yet, just because I don't want this to be just a "moment" thing. You know? So, I'm planning to post that when people start to forget it. So maybe a week later or two weeks later.

This assertion connected to a later point that Joel made about dynamics in society, both in Japan and in a broader scale: the tendency to "forget about things and move onto the next fiery topic." Joel's decision to amplify his acquaintance's BLM website *after* it was trending hints at an intervention against the unfortunate performative, ephemeral engagement in digital activism among some users of SNS. This is the politics of temporality and SNS usage. After engagement is achieved, how is it sustained? This politics also necessitates examination of what constitutes "engagement." Is it the act of "boosting" a movement through the sharing of content? Is it posting one's own original content? Is digital activism increasingly becoming a performance?

⁷³ *Tarento*, or "talents," are media personalities who, as the title suggests, specialize in myriad talents ranging from singing to acting.

Within our interview, Joel remarked that he was shocked that racism was so blatantly present in the United States; a contrast to racism in Japan, which he viewed as more subdued yet insidious. The stories told by Black Japanese individuals highlight encounters, both blatant and subdued, occurring throughout a lifetime that are discriminatory and othering. Such encounters can be so pervasive and frequent that they are accepted as an unfortunate yet unavoidable component of lived experience—or, as Joel described, something that one gets “used to.” These encounters, combined with the persistent and continuous propagation of the myths that Japan is “homogeneous” and thus is devoid of racism, is reminiscent of what Nixon (2011) characterizes as “slow violence.” Nixon explains that while violence is frequently perceived and represented as “immediate,” “explosive,” and/or highly visible, slow violence is temporal and “occurs gradually and out of sight”—as a result of this drawn-out nature, slow violence is “typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). By drawing attention to slow violence, Nixon emphasizes that violence exists in multiple forms and representations. Violence bears different visibilities that can add up over time. The narratives of Joel and Grace in the wake of the BLM movement constitute a form of resistance against the continuous propagation of anti-Black violence in Japan, slow and otherwise. The act of ignoring the issue or treating the issue as a fleeting “trend” is a form of violence that, in the eyes of Joel and Grace, cannot continue.

@cocoalizzy

Instagram user @cocoalizzy, called Lizzy by her followers, has played a significant role in disseminating information on BLM in Japanese and spreading awareness on racism in Japan. On June 2nd, 2020, Lizzy posted a video on IGTV, Instagram’s platform for posting longer videos, that has now been viewed over 2 million times. The video, aiming to spread awareness on the situation in the United States to a Japanese audience, bore the following caption:

What I want all Japanese people to know about anti-Black discrimination.
#BLACKLIVESMATTER

All my Japanese folks, I want you to know what is happening right now. Even now, there are demonstrations taking place every day against anti-Black discrimination and police

brutality in the United States, and I want all Japanese people to take it upon themselves to learn more about the situation, which is applicable to all humans. As a Black woman I am one person who has been discriminated against, and since I am a half Japanese woman who can see things from the viewpoint of both countries, I am able to really see the differences in racial discrimination among people. I want all Japanese people to think a bit more about this. I especially want those who have traveled abroad, those who wish to learn English, those who listen to songs by Black artists, and those who have been impacted by [Black] culture to raise their voices and speak up against anti-Black racism. I want everyone to share this video as much as possible and raise awareness about the situation in the United States. Please feel something about the anti-Black racism that has been taking place for the last 100 years. #BLACKLIVESMATTER (@cocoalizzy)⁷⁴

In this video, Lizzy is wearing a bright yellow top and is sitting in front of a white wall decorated with plants. She is visibly crying as she explains the fact that Black people in the United States are killed just because of the color of their skin, and that the legacy of slavery still exists in the year 2020. Lizzy discusses the discrimination experienced by Black people globally today, including a discussion of her own positionality as a Black Japanese woman:

I'm Japanese in terms of heart (*kokoro*) and citizenship, but since my skin color is Black I've been a target of discrimination. There are many people who think that I'm a villain (*warumono*) just because of that, and there are people who have been killed because of that...people who are the same age as me, people who are younger than me...people have been killed while just going out shopping, or while just jogging (@cocoalizzy, 2:16-2:52).

Lizzy describes the discrimination she also experienced in Japan, recalling how customers at her part-time job expressed that they did not wish to buy products from a Black person, and wanted her to get fired. On another occasion, she was told that she would not be able to work at a restaurant because she would “scare the customers.” Ultimately, Lizzy wishes for her Japanese viewers to realize that the issue is not a struggle between Black Americans and white Americans, but rather a *global* marginalization of Black individuals. “It does not matter if you are Black, white, or Japanese, what do *you* think of this situation?” She asks, emphasizing that anti-Black racism and violence is not the concern of only one demographic (4:05-4:15). Lizzy urges her

⁷⁴ Translated by the author. The original caption can be found beneath the original video: <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CA7TyTeF8Jb/>.

audience to think more deeply about the meaning of the demonstrations. For example, rather than hyper-fixating on the destruction of property when viewing news coverage of the protests, Lizzy urges viewers to consider *why* this is taking place. As a way of urging her audience to develop more empathy towards the situation, throughout the video Lizzy also prompts viewers to imagine if *their* friends were discriminated against—or worse, murdered. What is interesting is Lizzy’s direct appeal towards Japanese individuals who consume Black culture. We may consider this to be a form of accountability towards those who enjoy Black culture but do not acknowledge the burdens of being Black (Tate 2003).

Lizzy’s video is significant not only because of its raw emotion, but also because of its acknowledgment of the power of SNS in spreading awareness of anti-Black racism—and users’ ability spread awareness. Lizzy emphasizes SNS as the best medium for sharing information regarding the situation in the United States, as she states:

But isn’t that the easiest way of sharing? That’s what I’m thinking. Everyone is definitely using their phones every day, and I feel that Instagram is probably opened about once every ten minutes. And during that time, I think videos, conversations, and shared posts are being looked at (@cocoalizzy, 6:47-7:00).

Lizzy wishes for her audience to learn from her video and to circulate it. She especially calls upon those with a significant number of followers to take more action. Finally, she closes her video by suggesting individual actions that her viewers can take, including searching for keywords such as “anti-Black racism” (*kokujin sabetsu*) and “America, George Floyd” on Google, reading content related to these keywords, and uploading this content onto their Instagram Stories.



Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Lizzy’s Instagram post (June 2nd), which became viral.

Twitter is often the object of study with regards to digital activism due to its centrality in movements such as the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 (Tufekci 2017). By highlighting Black Japanese storytelling on Instagram, I wish to emphasize that Instagram should also receive attention as a site of activism. In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I discussed Instagram through the lens of vibrant visuality, economy, and gendered sociality by virtue of its visual-centric and “spreadable” affordances. Here, I would like to suggest that Instagram’s popularity among youths in Japan combined with the appeal of its visual-centric affordances mark the platform as an effective means of sharing stories and spreading awareness of injustice and systemic oppression. As Lizzy mentions in her video, everyone is on their smartphones nowadays browsing Instagram. This is also proven in my interviews with interlocutors, as most mentioned that Instagram is currently the most popular SNS in Japan. Lizzy’s video offers Japanese audiences an accessible means of learning more about global anti-Black racism. We see that the “spreadability” affordance of Instagram, embodied by Lizzy’s requests of circulation, is crucial. Her video also paved the way for collaboration with SNS figures, such as queer YouTuber Kemio, on discussions of anti-Black racism. Grace had also shared Lizzy’s video onto

her own Instagram Story, with the caption: “She’s *hāfu* just like me, so proud of her!” Although Grace does not personally know her, Lizzy’s visibility as a Black Japanese woman combined with her vulnerable, brave act of storytelling fostered an affective, empathetic bond. Such a bond may be considered a “weak tie.” However, this does not—and should not—delegitimize the connection that is happening here.

Tufekci (2017) pushes against the view of digital activism as “slacktivism” or “clicktivism,” a view that bears its foundations in the perception that digital activism requires “little effort of commitment” or only involves “weak ties.” Tufekci warns that such a view assumes that “people who connect online are doing things only online” or that the digital is “less real” or “disconnected” from the “offline world” (xxvi). Tufekci contests that political action online *can* involve “strong ties” and motivate change:

Symbolic action online is not necessarily without power either — rather, the effect depends on the context. When Facebook friends change their avatar to protest discrimination against gay people, they also send a cultural signal to their social networks, and over time, such signals are part of what makes social change possible by changing culture. (xxvi)

Lizzy’s act of storytelling motivated Grace’s own acts of storytelling. Since late May of 2020, Grace has continued to share her stories, educating her Japanese acquaintances and followers about her experiences. Grace also continues to share Lizzy’s educational posts. There have been times in which Lizzy has found Grace’s own public Instagram Stories and commented—to Grace’s surprise! We see a chain reaction: Lizzy shares her stories, Grace watches and is inspired to also share her stories, and Grace’s followers learn more about lived experiences of Black Japanese individuals. The acts of posting and sharing lead to a ripple effect that contests the perceived affective and connective hierarchies of “weak” and “strong” ties.

Black Japanese Public Figures

Black Japanese individuals have been increasingly represented in Japanese media within the last decade. A notable moment for Black Japanese representation was the crowning of Ariana Miyamoto, who is half Black American, half Japanese, as Miss Universe Japan 2015. Miyamoto faced backlash for her victory, including assertions that Miss Universe Japan should “have a real Japanese face.” Nevertheless, Miyamoto expressed a resolve to represent mixed-race and Black Japanese identity, and “challenge the definition of being Japanese” (Fackler 2015). In the wake of the resurgence of the BLM demonstrations in the summer of 2020, prominent Black Japanese athletes expressed solidarity with the movement, facilitating the amplification of BLM on Japanese SNS.

On June 15th, 2020, Louis Okoye, a professional baseball player for the Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles who is of Nigerian and Japanese descent, published a Tweet that offered a harrowing account of the racism he has experienced throughout his life, beginning with his experiences of bullying in nursery school at the age of five.⁷⁵ “Back then, it seemed that every day was extremely hard. While gazing out from the balcony of my house, I wondered if I could jump and be reborn as a normal Japanese person. Now, I am still wondering what exactly this ‘normal’ is,” Okoye writes. Okoye explains that he has grown used to this and confesses that he has felt hardened as a result—at the same time, he says that because of these hard experiences he is able to live life without regrets. Okoye concludes: “I hope that I can connect with those who also wish to prevent their children from having the same experiences in the future.” He then adds #BlackLivesMatter in a follow-up Tweet. As of January 11th, 2021, his original Tweet has received 188.4K likes and has reached 50.3K Retweets.

The outspoken support of Naomi Osaka, a professional tennis player of Japanese and Haitian descent who represents Japan, also led to a centering of BLM on Japanese Twitter. Razack and Joseph (2021) have discussed how Osaka’s status as representing Japan sometimes

⁷⁵ The original Tweet can be accessed via the following link:
<https://twitter.com/LOUISOKOYEMoM/status/1272536049013514242>.

results in the erasure of her Haitian heritage; at the same time, her Japanese heritage is frequently questioned, and she is the target of racist comments regarding her Blackness. Concurrent with these erasures is the attempted erasure of her activism. Osaka has utilized Twitter as a platform to share her own thoughts regarding anti-Black racism and amplify BLM in the wake of the 2020 global demonstrations. “Just because it isn’t happening to you doesn’t mean it isn’t happening at all,” Osaka posted on May 29th, 2020.⁷⁶ Osaka’s digital activism, however, was met with criticism from users on Twitter. Osaka’s public profile and celebrity status, combined with Twitter’s “Translate Tweet” affordance, meant that while her Tweets could circulate rapidly and aid in the amplification of the movement, they could also be critiqued. This criticism, which centered on assertions that sports should not be entangled with “politics,” did not deter Osaka. Within a Tweet posted on June 4th, 2020 that has since garnered over 94.K likes, Osaka asserted that BLM is a human rights issue, and that her positionality as an athlete should not bar any discussion of the movement:

I hate when random people say athletes shouldn’t get involved with politics and just entertain. Firstly, this is a human rights issue. Secondly, what gives you more right to speak than me? By that logic if you work at IKEA you are only allowed to talk about the “GRÖNLID” [shrug emoji]?⁷⁷

During the U.S. Open in September 2020, Osaka wore seven black masks bearing the names of seven Black Americans killed by the police: Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Tamir Rice. When asked about her intended message, Osaka stated in response: “Well, what was the message that you got was more the question. I feel like the point is to make people start talking” (Callow 2021; Mansoor 2020).

⁷⁶ The original Tweet can be accessed via the following link:
<https://twitter.com/naomiosaka/status/1266514627934015489>.

⁷⁷ The original Tweet can be accessed via the following link:
<https://twitter.com/naomiosaka/status/1268590075786326017>. The last sentence of Osaka’s Tweet, references an item sold at the furniture store chain IKEA to highlight the absurdity of suggesting that an individual’s daily discourse can only be limited to their line of work.

But not everyone bears the same massive followings as celebrities. Outside of these notable media events—which largely featured Black Japanese athletes—BLM did not dominate the topics and hashtags listed as “Trending” on Japanese Twitter due to the heavy focus on the pandemic and national politics. Grace and Joel had also noticed the lack of discussion on BLM on Japanese SNS. During our conversations, both voiced their disappointment in this lack of conversation and spoke of the ways they have sought to redress this silence on their own SNS feeds. As I have described, Grace and Joel turned to their Instagram accounts to break this silence.

Japan as Site of Inquiry: Counterpublics and Black Digital Networks

Can SNS serve as sites of critical resistance through the sharing of deeply personal stories of injustice and systemic inequity? How can these stories educate audiences and confront longstanding misconceptions in society? In what ways can SNS be harmful to movements via the misuse and abuse of their affordances? The past decade has borne witness to the amplification of scholarly works centering on the intersections of Blackness and digital media, or what Hamilton (2020) refers to as critical race and digital studies. The literature within this field has approached topics such as the inherent racial biases of algorithms, #BlackLivesMatter, and the development of online communities such as “Black Twitter” (Benjamin 2019; Brock 2020; Florini 2019; McIlwain 2019; Noble 2018; Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2020). The literature, however, currently focuses on Blackness from the perspective of the United States, along with digital hardware and software made and developed within this same geographic context. There is a need to expand this focus. As Sobande (2020) highlights, Black (digital) experiences cannot be reduced to a monolith—although the digital seems “borderless,” one must not neglect the impact of “social constructions of the nation-state, citizenship, ethnicity, racial identity and borders” (6). Scholarship on the intersections of Blackness and digital media would benefit from the addition of Japan as a case study.

Florini's (2019) discussion of the potential of transnational Black digital networks in fostering Black solidarity further hints at the promise of Japan as a case study in the establishment of Afro-Asian solidarity (25). The stories shared by Black Japanese users may constitute counterpublics, "the alternative networks of debate created by marginalized members of the public" (Jackson, Bailey, Foucault Welles 2020, xxxiii). Such narratives not only spread crucial information related to BLM, but also confronted misrepresentations and misperceptions of the movement. We might think of how digital technologies in Japan offer opportunities to amplify the voices of Black Japanese users. For Black Japanese users in particular, this may involve speaking against racialized stereotypes in Japan or stereotypes that specifically target *hāfu* in Japan.

The use of SNS by Grace, Joel, Lizzy, and other Black Japanese individuals highlights the potentiality of SNS as what Bonilla and Rosa (2015) describe as "a site for the revaluation of black materiality." Much like the Black youth who participated in #Ferguson, Black Japanese users during the moment of the 2020 global BLM protests sought to "document, contest, and ultimately transform their quotidian experiences by simultaneously asserting the fundamental value and the particularity of their embodiment both on- and off-line" (9). Furthermore, users such as Lizzy and Grace spoke against those who appropriate and attempt to embody Blackness in Japan yet remain silent on the issue of anti-Black racism and violence. It is also worth noting the invocation of affect and empathy in the videos posted by Lizzy and Grace: a call for Japanese viewers to imagine *themselves* or their loved ones in the positionality of Black individuals who are endangered every day due to persistent anti-Black racism and violence.

Florini explains that the convergent and participatory nature of digital media provides opportunities for historically and systemically oppressed groups, yet can also erase and undermine their voices (2019, 7). In the case of Japan, the source of this erasure may be the long-standing imagination of Japan as "homogeneous" and thus devoid of racism. Issues of racism and anti-Blackness are, as Russell (2020) explains, viewed as "a Western affliction" or existing "well outside of Japanese experience" (4). Their voices may also be erased by actors such as the

ultra-right-wing users of SNS (*neto uyo*), known for their intimidation tactics and feared by the mainstream media itself (8).

The complicated reception of BLM in Japan and the subsequent action taken by Black Japanese users of SNS offer multiple entry points for critical analysis. Of particular interest are the claims against which Black Japanese users were taking action: the perception of BLM as a “trend” and the perception that the issue of anti-Black racism and violence is not relevant to Japan. It is possible that the misperception of BLM as a trend resulted from the conflation of all uses of the hashtag affordance with media ideologies and imagined affordances centering on entertainment, performativity, and participatory culture. Activism on Instagram contends with the imagination of Instagram as a platform of vibrant visuality. When the affordances of SNS such as Instagram allow Stories to vanish within 24 hours, it may become easy for some to treat a movement or media event as vanishing. Joel’s resolution to circulate his acquaintance’s website on BLM at a later date signals a desire to keep BLM alive in his followers’ feeds in the months following the initial protests.

Surface-level engagement with digital activism may also set the ground for confusion. Grace’s discussion of her colleague who viewed BLM as a “trend” took place within the context of #BlackoutTuesday, a media event taking place on June 2nd, 2020 in which myriad SNS users posted a black box on their feeds as a way to decenter their typical SNS activity and draw attention to BLM. #BlackoutTuesday diverged from the original initiative from which it was derived, known as #TheShowMustBePaused, which was started by Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang to protest anti-Black racism and inequality in the music industry and “disrupt the work week” to motivate deep reflection.⁷⁸ However, as celebrities in the music industry demonstrated solidarity by posting a black box on their SNS profiles and other users followed suit, the original initiative morphed into something else entirely. The digital media event also proved to pose harm to activist efforts, as multiple participants added #BLM to their black

⁷⁸ #TheShowMustBePaused’s mission statement can be found via the following link: <https://www.theshowmustbepaused.com/about>.

boxes—when searching for essential information regarding on-the-ground protests by typing “#BLM” in search functions on SNS, activists instead encountered rows of black boxes (Coscarelli 2020; Willingham 2020).

It is also possible that concentrated media coverage of protests in the United States, both in mainstream media and on SNS, created a sense of distance from the movement (“there” not “here”) among Japanese users of SNS. The *Sekai no Ima* animated clip, which focused on income inequality, COVID-19, and looting in the United States, is an example of such distanced framing. Lizzy’s call for users to search *kokujin sabetsu* on the Internet suggests that perhaps it is no longer excusable to *not* know of the movement. Similarly, Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020) also assert that “not knowing where to look for alternative narratives is no longer an excuse for those in the mainstream” (198). Thus, while both SNS and media (mis)representations may have sowed the seeds of confusion, users did—and do—have the autonomy to invest time in understanding the movement. Japanese users also had the ability to learn more about the BLM protests taking place within Japan, along with national episodes of police brutality, demonstrated by the violence enacted against a Kurdish man in Shibuya in May 2020 (Saito 2020). However, there are nuances here regarding accessibility to information and media literacy.

A third dynamic that possibly resulted in the complicated reception of BLM among Japanese users of SNS is the imagination of Japan as “homogeneous” and thus exempt from issues of racism and anti-Blackness. This is an imagination with a deep and complicated history, evident in folklorist Yanagita Kunio’s notorious framing of Japan as a homogeneous small island nation (Oguma 2002[1995], 175-89). It is also evident in *nihonjinron* scholarship, or the theory of “Japaneseness” that centers on the “cultural, racial, and ethnic homogeneity of Japan” (Befu 2001, 68-69). *Nihonjinron* relied heavily on the so-called “coterminousness of geography, race, language, and culture,” ultimately asserting that those who “carry” Japanese culture are those who live in Japan, bear fluency in Japanese, and share the “pure” blood of the “Japanese race” (71). However, Japan is *not* homogeneous, as evident in the presence of Ainu, *zainichi* (ethnic

Koreans), mixed-race individuals, and other populations. Furthermore, Japan has had a long relationship with Blackness.

Scholars have noted the arrival of enslaved Black people with Portuguese traders in the mid-1500s as perhaps Japan's first encounter with Blackness (Leupp 1995; Russell 2020; Sterling 2010). While the enslaved were initially viewed with marvel, Leupp (1995) explains that, by the late 18th century, dark skin carried negative connotations. Exposure to Western depictions of Black people as subhuman—evident in the minstrel show enacted for Japanese officials by white sailors in blackface aboard Commodore Matthew Perry's ship in 1854—especially impacted Japanese views on race (7). Later encounters with Blackness encompassed various exchanges and representations. There is the engagement of Black American intellectual-activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois with Japan (Onishi 2013); the consumption of Black culture, ranging from hip hop to Rastafarianism (Cornyetz 1994; Condry 2006; Sterling 2010); and the fetishization of the Black body and racist portrayals of Blackness, evident in literature such as *Chibikuro Sambo* (*Little Black Sambo*) (Bridges 2016; Russell 1991; Russell 1998).

With regards to mixed-race identity in Japan, scholars take the interracial relationships between European traders and Japanese women as a starting point (Earns 2017; Leupp 2017). Historical discourse on Black Japanese identity focuses on the context of World War II and the U.S. Occupation of Japan. In this discourse, Black Japanese children born from Black American GIs and Japanese women are often painted in a tragic light as “mixed-blood” orphans (Hamilton 2017; Koshiro 1999; Roebuck 2016; Sawada 2001). Contemporary discussions of Black Japanese identity have taken on more nuanced forms. Carter (2014), for example, has discussed how mixed Black Okinawans are “interpellated into militarized spaces in ways Black Japanese mainland people are not” (649). A common theme in examinations of mixed-race identity in Japan is marginalization through othering. This othering takes place in the context of ideologies such as *nihonjinron*. Shaitan and McEntee-Atalianis (2017) explain that such discourse impacts identity construction—mixed-race Japanese individuals who live in Japan are sometimes treated as “foreigners” and must navigate “self” and “other” ascriptions. Recent amplified coverage of

Black Japanese public figures, such as Ariana Miyamoto and Naomi Osaka, has brought issues of identity and othering to the public eye.

The acts of storytelling within this chapter suggest that Black Japanese users are resisting dominant ideologies and racialized stereotypes that still have a hold in contemporary Japan. The establishment of a Black digital network in Japan via SNS can potentially weaken or eradicate this hold. We cannot know or prove if their storytelling truly changed each viewer's racial consciousness, and this is the challenge of digital activism. However, what we *do* know is that these narratives are out there, being watched and circulated—in Lizzy's case, over 2 million times. Black Japanese individuals are striving to reclaim their agency in their own representation, and this is significant. Indeed, in their examination of Naomi Osaka's use of social media in resisting "racial binary or fixed Japanese identity classifications", Razack and Joseph (2021) suggest that social media can provide athletes "with chances to re-write the racialized story of their success" (302). I suggest that Black digital networks in Japan are worth continued examination well beyond the temporal moment of 2020 because of their potential in fostering activism and community-building. These digital networks become especially crucial when "in-person" opportunities for connection become difficult or impossible—for example, during pandemic times.

Conclusion: Not a Trend

Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and other digital activist movements are not trends. These movements act against long-standing injustice and oppression. Both in Japan and worldwide, SNS played a key role in the exchange of information, the sharing of powerful narratives, and the confrontation of long-standing systemic racism and anti-Blackness. In the case of Japan, SNS also served as a site of contesting the perception that racism does not exist in Japan, a contestation enacted by Black Japanese users who shared their stories. Scholars of Japan must pay heed to digital revolutions online. These revolutions are occurring daily. For example, in

early January 2021, the hashtag #Ethnic Korean Tweets (#在日のツイート; #Zainichi no tsuīto) trended with the original intention of spreading hatred towards ethnic Koreans living in Japan. However, Twitter users, in contestation of this trend, decided to add this hashtag to Tweets depicting food. This usage of the hashtag constituted a counter-rebellion against hate speech in Japan. User stories are also valuable in examinations of digital revolutions, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter. Of course, this also involves navigating ethics and a recognition that these narratives are only part of a bigger picture. Life stories cannot be fully encapsulated within the bounds of character limits. Furthermore, a sole focus on the digital neglects experiences and activism that are taking place offline.

While I have primarily focused on the use of SNS in educating through the sharing of narratives that counteract hegemonic discourse, there is of course the very real issue of misinformation and disinformation. The dynamics that I have discussed within this chapter can also be at play within nationalist groups. Thus, here I again echo the reminder that I issued at the start of this dissertation: SNS is not entirely a force of good nor evil. There are nuances, and scholars need to pay attention to these nuances. The very platforms that can empower are also neoliberal institutions, including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, and are created and used in the backdrop of global neoliberalism. Digital anthropologists should also reflect upon how U.S. hegemony is at work through and within these platforms.



Mediation: “There is no racism in Japan.”

Towards the end of my fieldwork, an acquaintance invites me to eat at a restaurant in my neighborhood. I ultimately decide to leave my hair in an afro, rather than take an extra twenty minutes to comb it down. Upon opening the door to the restaurant, my acquaintance looks at me

with widened eyes. “*Kin-chan!* Your hair!”⁷⁹ As I eat, I notice two children staring and smiling at me. I wave hello, and both children then yell: “*Kowai* (so scary)!”. Taken aback, I look around and notice that the surrounding individuals, including my acquaintance, are laughing. Before the children leave, they look back at me once more. I wave again, and they once again yell “*kowai!*” before leaving with their mother. I tell my acquaintance that the incident has upset me. “They probably have never seen a foreigner before,” he shrugs. I have my doubts, given our location in Tokyo.

I have always been aware that my various intersecting identities—Dominican American, Black, “mixed,” woman—impact my experiences in the field. This awareness sometimes leads to a numb acceptance of interactions that are subtle or blatant responses to my identities. Yet, the incident at the restaurant leaves me with a sinking feeling in my stomach. Distressed, I immediately message Grace. I have reservations on relying on interlocutors for emotional support, as this can result in the performance of emotional labor. However, Grace and I have developed a close connection, and I do not know to whom I should turn. Grace responds quickly and thoughtfully in a mixture of English and Japanese:

Honestly, I know that feeling, I have experienced that so many times or hella worse. Sometimes, kids can be too honest and innocent...

Good parents will correct them on the spot but if not, oh well, it's the parents' fault. They have to educate and teach their kids what's 👍👍 / 🙄🙄.
80% of the time, if things like that happen I will just let it go.
Although, case by case I will talk to them and teach them in a fun way maybe haha.

I know in Japan, people will stare at us a lot. People say things that they shouldn't. If I were you, I would think of it like this:
“This kid is the luckiest kid to see MY afro for the first time! I became his hair role model so I hope this kid will never forget me” haha

But at the same time, I'm sorry that happened and it must hurt your feelings.
But don't forget, no matter what people say, you're beautiful!

⁷⁹ My nickname, derived from my name (*Kinbari*). The “-chan” within my nickname is an endearing honorific that is typically used when addressing close friends, children, and/or girls.

And it's normal to look different, so be unique. We aren't the same. We are all different people. Looking similar isn't that fun.

Always be yourself, *Kin-chan wa hitori shika sonzai shinai kara* (there is only one *Kin-chan* in existence).

No one can change you from being you!

In closing with this vignette, I include my own storytelling to open a conversation on positionality and fieldwork. I am now aware of the nuances of that moment in the restaurant and I feel less of a visceral response. However, I wish that my training as an ethnographer included a candid discussion of how to process these moments—which, while difficult, can also be opportunities for dialogue. Discussions of racism, including the racism experienced by Black scholars, are still approached with trepidation by scholars in Asian Studies. However, these conversations need to happen. Scholars must reflect on their positionality, their own potential complicity in systemic inequality, and their commitment to activism. Perhaps this should be incorporated into ethnographic training—how to confront racism, how to support interlocutors and mentees in times of distress, and how to intervene in the face of injustice.

Chapter Four

Are the Kids Alright?

Danger, Risk, and Harm in Public Discourse

Mediation: Death of a Flower

It is the early afternoon of May 23rd, 2020, and I am sitting at my desk. I log into Twitter to check the trends for the day, a habit that I had started in December. My heart stops upon seeing the following “In memoriam” news, written in English, in the list of trends: “Professional wrestler Hana Kimura has died at age 22.” Throughout my time in Japan, I had watched the latest season of *Terrace House*, a reality television series centering on the lives of six strangers—three men and three women—who move into a share house. Kimura Hana was featured in this latest season, and I favored her among the cast members. Still shocked by the news, and perhaps a bit in denial, I open Instagram on my phone and check Hana’s profile. I notice that there is a new post—an image of her with her pet kitten. On top of this image is an overlay of text that bears the following message in Japanese: “I love you, have fun and live a long life. I’m sorry.” I then notice that there is a pink, fluorescent ring around her Instagram icon, indicating that she has also added to her Story. Her Story featured four “selfies,” both by herself and with her kitten. The last selfie bears the following text: “Goodbye.” At this moment, I feel a knot in my stomach. After combing through various news articles and threads on SNS, it became clear that Kimura Hana had committed suicide. In the days leading up to her suicide, she had posted that she was experiencing cyberbullying and was receiving hundreds of malicious messages per day. On May 23rd, several of these malicious posts were still visible on Hana’s Twitter feed but have since been deleted.⁸⁰ Hana had also posted images of self-harm, which were eventually deleted by Twitter.

⁸⁰ In some cases, these posts were removed by Twitter—in others, the users deleted the posts themselves after receiving much pushback from other Twitter users. What is particularly conflicting about the latter case is that the cyberbullies themselves were shamed by Twitter users. While these cyberbullies do need

Discussions of Hana’s death dominated Twitter on May 23rd and the ensuing days, as users lamented the star’s death and urged fellow users to consider the impact of their words on the mental wellbeing of others. Fellow cast members of Terrace House posted tributes to Hana on their own SNS accounts. Other celebrities, such as Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, spoke up, reminding the public that celebrities are *people* and are not impervious to cyberbullying. At various points on May 23rd, I take note of the prevalence of the following trends:

Trend	Tag Romaji and Translation	Quantity of Posts
#木村花	#KimuraHana	102K Tweets as of 10:57 PM
花ちゃん	Hana-chan	23.9K Tweets as of 3:26 PM
誹謗中傷	<i>Hibōchūshō</i> (Slander)	517K Tweets as of 11:24 PM
テラスハウス	Terrace House	18.2K Tweets as of 3:36 PM
#RIPHanaKimura	#RIPHanaKimura	9,820 Tweets as of 3:41 PM
言葉の暴力	<i>Kotoba no bōryoku</i> (The violence of words)	16K Tweets as of 7:41 PM

As a result of Hana’s suicide, *Terrace House* has been discontinued. Furthermore, lawmakers have begun to discuss potential new courses of action against cyberbullying. Such courses of action include the ability to ask data and Internet providers to track and deliver the IP addresses of cyberbullies to the authorities. However, legal concerns centering on privacy constitute core obstacles to the development and implementation of such legislation.

I noticed that following May 23rd, nearly all of my interviews involved some mentioning of Kimura Hana and cyberbullying. This was especially the case for newer participants in my project, who are primarily college students. Yoshi explicitly mentions that his motivation for

to take accountability for their harmful words, the intense shaming by other Twitter users perpetuated the cycle of cyberbullying. Hana Kimura’s mother eventually requested Twitter users to refrain from perpetuating the cycle in this manner.

participating in my project was to speak about Kimura Hana's passing and raise awareness on the negative impact of cyberbullying. "The reason why I participated in this interview is because of what happened to Hana-*chan*...I thought that it would be good if there was better SNS usage from here on out, so I participated in the interview and thought it would be good if I could contribute to the cause," he explained. Takenori mentions that he had tried to persuade his girlfriend to participate in my study, although she now "refuses" to talk about SNS because she is so upset about Kimura Hana's death:

"I told my girlfriend to participate in your interview, but she said 'I just want to keep away from SNS things, so I don't want to participate in it.' Yeah...you know...Kimura Hana? She [my girlfriend] was really sad because she was watching *Terrace House*. She thinks the accident was horrible, also she just doesn't want to get *too too* much into Instagram, because she always watches it and hates that thing, like she wants to keep it away."

When asked about the positive and negative aspects of SNS and smartphone usage, Takenori spoke of the relationship between the portable nature of smartphones and cyberbullying: "So I think the bad consequence is that we can write anything through smartphones easily, because we have it in hand. It's really close to us...it's good for us sometimes, but bad for us sometimes. Bashing, criticism...that happens when we don't use smartphones properly."

Mai also comments that she has been thinking of *hibōchūshō* (slander) lately, given the passing of Kimura Hana. She remarks that online slander and cyberbullying have always been issues, but the coverage of a death related to cyberbullying was rare.

"I think it [*hibōchūshō*] has always been around. Especially on Twitter...it has always been around, but I think this is probably one of the first times that someone like Kimura Hana-san has passed away from it. The fact that *hibōchūshō*, that those bad comments killed someone...such bad comments have a tremendous power and magnitude, and the news informed people of that."

Many interviewees, particularly *shakaijin* and mothers, expressed pity for youth because they have to navigate bullying on SNS. When speaking about Hana's death, Nanao, a mother and core

interlocutor, mentions that the anonymous nature of SNS motivates users to say things that they would not normally state in person. Nanao says that she would know how to ignore malicious comments if they came to her. Her son, too, mentions that he ignores the bullying that he receives over LINE. However, this is not the case for everyone. Nanao reveals that her daughter has been stressed over class drama that has been taking place over LINE. Nanao, along with other interviewees, express concern for middle schoolers and elementary school students who will have to grow up in this digital landscape.

Himawari, a high schooler who is another core interlocutor, suggests that I watch the 2019 drama, *San'nen a gumi* (3年A組; *Class 3A*). “The last episode really makes you think about SNS usage,” she texts in an Instagram Direct Message (DM). The drama centers on a young teacher, Hīragi-sensei, who holds his homeroom hostage to figure out the circumstances surrounding one student’s suicide, which was ultimately revealed to have been triggered by cyberbullying. While various students in the classroom hurt the student in question in multiple ways, it is revealed that the “culprit” was SNS. In the final episode, Hīragi-sensei delivers a soliloquy on the harmful impacts of cyberbullying. What is particularly powerful about this scene is that he delivers it in front of a computer screen as part of a livestream—however, it feels as if he is delivering the message to *us*, the viewers of the drama itself. Many Twitter users have referenced this scene in response to Hana’s death. After leaving the field, I would learn that another SNS and smartphone-related drama would be aired, titled *Anonimasu: Keishichō “yubi satsujin” taisakushitsu* (アノニマス～警視庁“指殺人”対策室～; “Anonymous: Metropolitan Police Department ‘Finger Murderer’ Countermeasure Office”). This drama, as the name suggests, centers on a division of a police department that specializes in crimes and murders mediated by SNS and/or smartphones. At the end of the drama’s trailer, a detective forcefully grabs the finger of a presumed murderer before stating: “You killed someone with this single finger.” While I was not in Japan to watch the series and ask about its reception, I found the very notion of *yubi satsujin* to be intriguing—and resonated with events such as the suicide of Kimura Hana.



In previous chapters, I have focused on the roles of SNS and smartphones in mediating sociality, intimacy, and community-building. However, concerns regarding the connections between these technologies, accidents, mediated crime, and deteriorating mental and physical health were prevalent throughout my fieldwork. How do we navigate the nuances of the “dark side” of smartphone and SNS usage? How do we negotiate the shifting boundaries of what is “normal” and “pathological”? What can we learn from intergenerational concerns regarding SNS and smartphone use? In this chapter, I introduce public discourse on the dangers and risks associated with SNS and smartphone usage in contemporary Japan. I highlight the narratives of youths, their parents, and adults as they negotiate the benefits and disadvantages of the embeddedness of SNS and smartphones in their everyday lives. I also discuss the myriad safety concerns that accompany narrations of smartphone and SNS usage. While parents focused on the potential harm that this usage inflicts to the user’s own body in terms of “addiction” and life rhythm, youths primarily centered issues of cyberbullying and deteriorating mental health. Furthermore, youths demonstrated great reflexivity with their own SNS and smartphone usage, sometimes admitting to the very patterns of behavior that concerned their parents.

In the first section, I offer examples of accidents, incidents, and concerns of danger and risk as represented in public discourse and the media. Such representations include manner posters scattered in public transportation, news coverage of accidents and incidents, talk shows, and fictional films and dramas. In the second section, I outline government and platform initiatives centering on “good” use and “peace of mind” to examine boundaries of care, prevention, and pathology. I contextualize these initiatives within the larger academic literature on public health in Japan to examine how informal measures and individual action are highlighted as safeguards against risk and harm. In the third section, I discuss concerns related to SNS and smartphones as a continued symptom of the disintegration of previously stable social structures in Japanese society following the economic downturn of the 1990s, including the

erosion of *ba* (social location) and *ibasho* (places of belonging). In the fourth section, I draw upon conversations with interlocutors, including three families, to highlight the complex spectrum of reactions to the positive and negative aspects of SNS and smartphone usage as tools of communication and information. As I demonstrate, there are differences *and* intersections within the concerns vocalized by intergenerational users of these technologies. Concern is not limited to parents, and youths are not necessarily unsuspecting victims of these technologies. In the fifth section, I discuss the “new” demands on the self that are set in motion by digital technologies and situate these new demands within the larger literature on processes of self-making in Japanese society. In the conclusion, I discuss the need for scholars to acknowledge the possibilities and pitfalls of digital technologies in a balanced manner.

Digital (De)vices: Accidents, Incidents, and Concerns in the Media

The act of walking while using a smartphone bears its own colloquialism: *aruki sumaho*.⁸¹ The very existence of this colloquialism hints at the prevalence of this act—along with its associated dangers and risks. In November 2015, NTT DoCoMo, one of the largest mobile phone retailers in Japan, released a commercial centering on the risks of *aruki sumaho*, titled “Samurai Smartphone Parade” in English.⁸² Viewers are transported to the Edo period, in which a *daimyō* (feudal lord) is embarking on a journey to the capital. However, there is one major twist: both the *daimyō* and his entourage of *samurai* are equipped with smartphones. The *daimyō* sits within his palanquin as his attendants carry him towards the capital—little does he know, the number of his attendants steadily dwindles as they sustain smartphone-related injuries. Each

⁸¹ *Aruki sumaho* is a combination of “walking” (*aruki*; a noun form of the verb “to walk,” *aruku*) and “smartphone” (*sumātofon* or *sumaho*). *Aruki sumaho* can be considered as a continuation of *nagara* discourse within *keitai* studies. Fujimoto (2005) defines *nagara* as “while-doing-something-else,” a “state of multitasking separately, in parallel, and asynchronously while walking, moving, or playing” (80). See Fujimoto 2005 for a deeper discussion of *nagara* culture among youths from the 1990s onwards.

⁸² The Japanese title of the commercial is *Aruki sumaho sankin kōtai* (歩きスマホ参勤交代). Some historical context is necessary here. *Sankin kōtai* refers to the policy in which *daimyō* alternated between their residence in their home domain and Edo, the capital. The English title of the commercial, “Samurai Smartphone Parade,” does not translate *sankin kōtai*. Furthermore, *aruki sumaho* is also not translated.

injury depicted within the commercial is accompanied by a statistic associated with smartphone usage in present day Japan. For example, once an attendant wandering absentmindedly with his smartphone bumps into a messenger, viewers are shown a statistic: “BUMP: 66% of people have run into others when using a smartphone while walking.” Yet another statistic occurs once an attendant falls into a moat as his eyes are fixated onto the screen of his smartphone: “FALL: 3.6% of people have fallen from a platform when Texting While Walking.” The commercial ends as the *daimyō* emerges from his palanquin only to realize that none of his attendants remain. The following intertitle accompanies this scene: “Everyone, please look forward when you are walking.”

Through the use of the historical past, this commercial opens a dialogue on the dangers associated with smartphone usage and movement in the present. Manner posters and electronic tickers located on train platforms in Tokyo warn commuters to refrain from using smartphones while walking, in order to circumvent the risk of bumping into other commuters or falling onto the train tracks. While the risks associated with movement and smartphone usage are well-known, these risks became especially apparent during a December 2017 incident in which a university student collided with a pedestrian while riding her bicycle. The pedestrian, aged seventy-seven, was killed upon impact. It was revealed that the student had been biking while looking at her smartphone, holding a drink, and wearing a headphone in her left ear. In August 2018, the university student received a two-year prison sentence from the Yokohama District Court and was suspended from her university. According to a survey conducted by the Telecommunications Carriers Association (TCA) and published in *The Asahi Shimbun*’s coverage of the student’s sentence, although 96.5% of survey respondents agreed that walking while using a smartphone is dangerous, 49.1% of respondents were guilty of performing this action. More extensive statistics reveal the motivations related to using smartphones while walking: for example, 43.5% of such motivations are attributed to digital clocks and mapping applications, and 22.0% are attributed to checking social media and messaging platforms such as LINE (Saitō et. al 2018).

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered numerous stories of accidents and incidents that were linked to smartphone and SNS usage. Several of these stories were covered on mainstream news outlets such as the NHK—I often encountered these stories serendipitously while watching TV or scrolling through Twitter. Interlocutors frequently relayed news articles about accidents and incident or spoke of notable incidents during our conversations. When visiting Hashimoto’s bar one evening, he immediately pulled out his phone upon seeing me. “*Kin-chan*, I read this article and thought of you,” he said, before sliding his phone over. The article on his screen, published by *The Tokyo Shimbun*, warned readers about the astonishing capabilities of “digital stalkers.” One example was their ability to find home addresses just by looking at the reflection of scenery in victims’ pupils within high resolution selfies. Yet another surprising example discussed in the article was the potential theft of biometric data through the use of high-resolution photographs. According to the article, digital stalkers could replicate fingerprints by simply using photographs of the target posing with the “peace” sign, a popular photographic pose in which the individual forms the shape of a “V” with their forefinger and middle finger. The digital stalker can then use these replicated fingerprints to login to the victim’s devices (Tokyo Shimbun 2019). At first glance, these warnings seem to be far-fetched paranoia. The news coverage of a stalker incident during the same week, however, proved otherwise. In this incident, a member of an underground idol group was stalked and sexually assaulted by a fan who had pinpointed the train station closest to the idol’s residence by zooming into photographs uploaded by the idol online and studying the scenery reflected in her pupils.

Media coverage that linked incidents of kidnapping, deception, and suicide to smartphones and/or SNS were also prevalent throughout my fieldwork. One notable incident of kidnapping took place in late November 2019, in which a man kidnapped a sixth-year elementary school student from Osaka after befriending her online and arranging an in-person meeting at a park. The man held the girl captive, only feeding her once a day and allowing her to bathe every two days. The girl eventually escaped from the man’s apartment and managed to reach a police box (*kōban*) miles away. She was not wearing shoes, as her kidnapper had

confiscated her shoes and smartphone. Kidnapping was discussed by interlocutors, adults and high schoolers alike, as a fear related to contemporary smartphone and SNS use. Media coverage of suicides linked to cyberbullying were numerous, most notably the suicide of Kimura Hana. As described in this chapter's introductory Mediation, several interlocutors drew upon Hana's suicide when discussing the potential harms of SNS. As I will discuss later in this chapter, interlocutors also drew upon the suicide and broader incidents of cyberbullying to convey a message to the readers of my dissertation: namely, to use social media "correctly."

Television and film portrayals of smartphones, SNS, and the concerns associated with these digital technologies were pervasive throughout my fieldwork. While casually flipping through television channels on the morning of August 13th, 2020, I stumbled upon a television feature on the impact of smartphone use on posture. According to the television feature, broadcasted by the morning television show "Baguette," constant craning of the neck to look at smartphones leads to "straight neck." Two illustrations of a woman with a pink shirt and brown hair are juxtaposed to illustrate the abnormality of "straight neck." The illustration on the right depicts a woman with the normal curvature of the cervical vertebrae (*keitsui*). The illustration on the left depicts a woman with "straight neck." She is holding a smartphone and is jutting her neck outwards to look at the screen—as a result, her cervical vertebrae take on a straight rather than curved form. The image is accompanied by a statistic: 80% of the Japanese population has "straight neck."



Figure 4.1: Photograph taken by the author of the morning television feature on the impact of smartphones on posture.

Interlocutors mentioned that portrayals of the “dark side” of smartphone and SNS use found within films and dramas sometimes influenced their perception of risks and dangers—even motivating deep reflection or reconsiderations of their own usage. One film that was referenced frequently in interviews was *Sumaho o otoshita dake na no ni* (スマホを落としただけなのに; “All I Did Was Drop My Smartphone”). Released in 2018, this horror film depicts a stalker scenario following the protagonist’s unfortunate mistake of leaving his smartphone in a taxi. Interlocutors, particularly high school and college students, confessed that the film terrified them. Riko, a university student, mentioned that she immediately changed the passcodes and passwords on her devices and accounts after watching the film. During my fieldwork, an “SNS suspense” bearing the ominous title *Forō saretara owari* (フォローされたら終わり; “If You’re Followed, You’re Done For”) debuted on the online streaming service AbemaTV (henceforth Abema). The drama centers on a group of *shakaijin*, all friends since high school, who are confronted with instances of blackmailing and harassment mediated by SNS. Each member of the friend group begins to experience blackmailing once they are followed by a mysterious Twitter user. Any “follow” from this account becomes a death sentence for one’s personal image. In the first episode, a friend leaps from a ledge after the Twitter user leaks videos of her

various acts of infidelity—all during her wedding celebration. Little does each member of the friend group know: the owner of the mysterious account is one of their own.



Figure 4.2: Promotional poster for *Forō saretara owari* at a train station in Tokyo. Photograph taken by the author in November 2019.

Although a sensational “whodunnit” suspense, *Forō saretara owari* also attempted to teach users about online safety and protection of private information. Abema sponsored the creation of a holiday officially recognized by the *Nihon Kinenbi Kyōkai*, the entity that oversees the creation of holidays in Japan. The holiday, *Ii forō no hi* (Good Follow Day), was officiated on November 26th, 2019. In the days leading up to the inaugural *Ii forō no hi*, Abema posted a series of online safety rules on its Twitter and website. For example, on November 20th, 2019, Abema warned of the risk of posting “fun gathering” pics online. Abema posts a picture of the engagement party from one episode of the drama and invites Twitter users to explain the risk posed by the picture. In the explanatory video posted by Abema several hours later, the camera zooms into a set of house keys on the table. The video then explains that it is possible for someone to use the image of the key to make a copy of the key via a 3D printer. The scenario is followed by the cautionary statement: “Let’s be careful about the appearance of valuables such

as keys in photographs (*kagi nado no kichōhin no utsurikomi ni ki o tsukemashō*).⁸³ In the weeks surrounding *Ii forō no hi*, Abema also sponsored the display of posters depicting SNS safety rules around the youth hub of Shibuya, not too far from Abema's headquarters. I trekked around Shibuya to locate the posters (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). While some of the poster locations were obscure, others were located in prominent locations such as the CINE QUINTO movie theater.

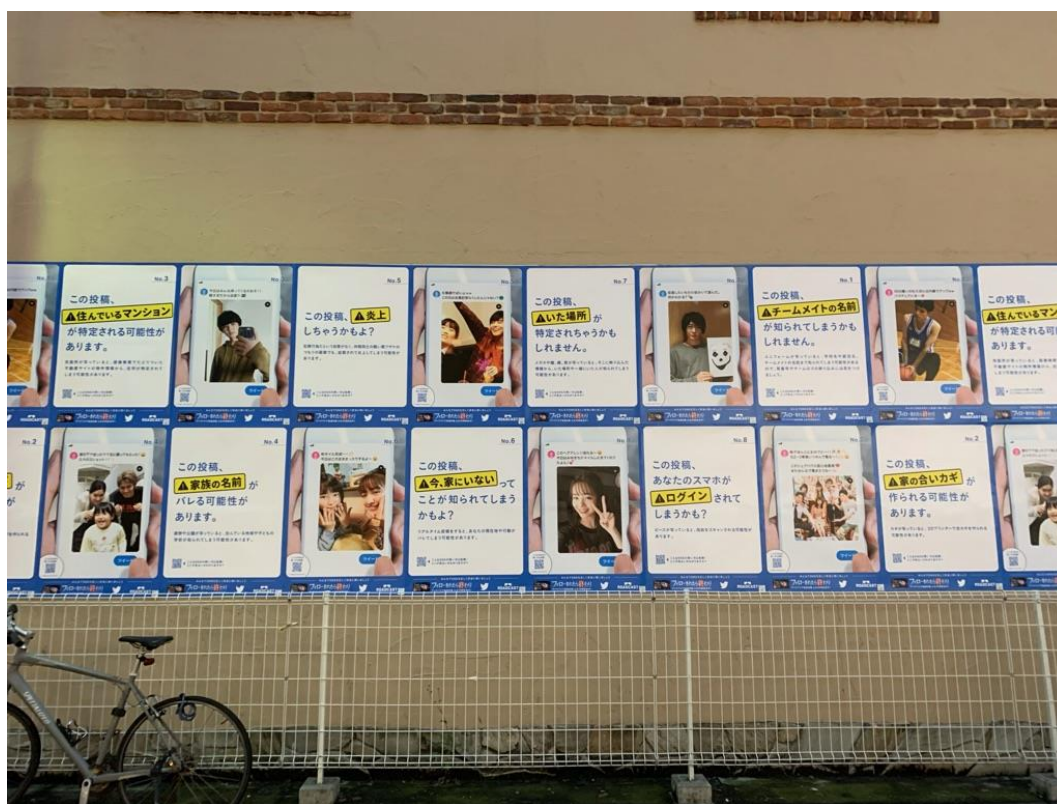


Figure 4.3: Photograph of the poster displays in Shibuya sponsored by AbemaTV. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

⁸³ The explanatory Tweet can be accessed via the following link: <https://twitter.com/ABEMA/status/1197121619178729472>.



Figure 4.4: Photographs of the poster displays in Shibuya sponsored by AbemaTV. Photographs taken by the author in 2019.

Negotiating the Boundaries of Care, Prevention, and Pathology

What do we make of the pervasiveness of public discourse on danger, risk, and harm? Social care of the body and prevention of harm have constituted themes of interest within work on public health in contemporary Japan. Borovoy and Roberto (2015) cite Japan as an interesting case study in public health strategies of curbing population weight gain. Drawing upon the examples of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's metabolic syndrome screening program and the Japanese national school lunch program, Borovoy and Roberto highlight the role of individual decision-making in Japanese society, where institutions “invest heavily in socializing individuals to think differently about health and welfare” (63). These institutions include schools and workplaces, and the efforts exhibited by these institutions to promote health

include “screening, promotion of individual record keeping, and patient education”—furthermore, the role of mothers in the domestic spheres supplements these efforts (69).

The efforts taken to promote health and welfare include a mixture of informal and formal measures. The history of tobacco regulation in Japan is yet another case study. In discussing tobacco policy, Feldman (2001) draws attention to “the reciprocal relationship between the formal and informal, the legal and social, between mandates and manners” (706). In 1987, The Tokyo District Court invoked a “tolerable limits” standard for public smoking and the impact of passive smoke. Interestingly, the ruling also declared that smoking is accepted within Japanese society (692). Feldman explains that in subsequent rulings, judges have described smoking as part of one’s individual preference or “taste” (697). Campaigns centering on smoking etiquette remind smokers to be considerate of others—such discourse on manners, while informal, still have an impact. Feldman suggests that legal informality creates “the conditions for a formal legal regime” (704). He states:

Informality is a critical step in that process. Instead of formal laws that are aspirational but may not be effective, at least not alone, informal expectations set out a normative behavioral template for both individuals and institutions. They do not demand change, but they suggest a form of behavior that is socially desirable. They articulate a new set of civility norms, and it is only a matter of time before the norms take hold. (705)

Contemporary regulation of “risky” smartphone and SNS usage constitute a possible case study for Feldman’s proposal.

The “nudges” provided by manner posters that warn of the dangers of *aruki sumaho* play one role in creating norms of smartphone etiquette. These posters, like the posters within public transportation that instruct commuters to put their phones on vibrate or “manner mode,” focus “on manners and not burdening others” (Borovoy and Roberto 2015, 65; Feldman 2001, 699). Ordinances and sponsored initiatives constitute yet another example. On July 1st, 2020, Yamato City in Kanagawa Prefecture put an ordinance in effect that prohibited *aruki sumaho* in public

spaces such as station squares, roads, and public parks.⁸⁴ This was the first ordinance of its kind in Japan. In prohibiting *aruki sumaho*, which bears the dangerous potential of causing traffic accidents, the ordinance seeks to ensure that people are able to move through and use public spaces comfortably (*kaiteki ni*) and with peace of mind (*anshin*).⁸⁵ On October 23rd, 2020, three railway companies—Odakyu, Sotetsu, and Tokyu—entered into agreement with Yamato City to enforce the ordinance within public transportation. Interestingly, the ordinance does *not* issue any fines to those who violate its tenets. Despite this lack of repercussions, a follow-up survey conducted in 2021 revealed that occurrences of *aruki sumaho* decreased in Yamato City (Kamijima 2021). However, it is important to note that nudges are limited in effectiveness: they are not coercive. Thus, nudges are also accompanied by guidance on the *individual* steps one can take to prevent and manage harm. The emphasis on individual action is evident in the public health efforts by government entities such as MIC.

The participation of MIC in online campaigns and initiatives centering on Internet safety is worthy of examination. MIC bears an online portal dedicated specifically to “good” or “wise” Internet use.⁸⁶ The portal offers extensive public health resources that cater to a wide spectrum of demographic audiences: preschoolers and their parents, youth (under the age of 18), guardians and educators, and seniors. Each subsection of the portal is also accompanied by a guidebook, complete with expressive illustrations, that outlines the various “Internet troubles” that are associated with certain age demographics and proposed ways of preventing these troubles. For example, the youth subsection of the portal illustrates the following scenario related to friend group chats. A-san, a young girl, is sending a message in a group chat comprised of her close

⁸⁴ The original ordinance and documents outlining its accompanying initiatives can be accessed via the following link: https://www.city.yamato.lg.jp/gyosei/soshik/71/bosai_anzenanshin/kotsuanzen/5105.html.

⁸⁵ Sternsdorff-Cisterna (2019) has explained that *anshin* denotes affect and “speaks to questions of the heart.” This differs from *anzen*, which points to “measurable magnitudes of safety” (12). While discussing *anshin* and *anzen* in the context of food safety and radiation following 3.11, this notion of *anshin* is applicable to *aruki sumaho*.

⁸⁶ The full title of the portal is “Let’s use the Internet wisely! A guide to safe and secure Internet use (*jōzu ni netto to tsukiaō! Anshin anzen na intānetto riyō gaido*).” The online portal can be accessed via the following link: https://www.soumu.go.jp/use_the_internet_wisely/.

friends. She is commenting on one friend's storytelling. She means to write: "Aren't their stories always so interesting?" In Japanese, this is written as "*Maru maru-chan no hanashitte sã, itsumo omoshirokunai?* (○○ちゃんの話ってさー、いつもおもしろくない?). However, A-san forgets to add a question mark to the end of her message. This exclusion creates a linguistic nuance. When a question mark follows the negative form of an adjective—in this case, *omoshirokunai* (stem form: *omoshiroi*)—this translates to "isn't it?" Without a question mark, this becomes a declarative "is not." Thus, A-san's message unfortunately reads as: "their stories are never interesting." A-san does not notice this and goes to take a bath. When looking at her smartphone after her bath, A-san finds that her friends have responded to her with messages along the lines of: "that's so cruel!" However, even when A-san tries to resolve this misunderstanding, she gets no response. It turns out that her friends have created another group chat that excludes her. This can be interpreted as a symbolic removal of A-san from the friend group. At the end of the scenario, a character serving as the mascot for MIC's "Internet troubles" guidebook advises the reader to exercise caution when sharing opinions and to be considerate of others' feelings (MIC 2022). On a side banner within the webpage, the reader can access a separate webpage that offers a deeper explanation of troubles among friends in group chats, including the broader issue of cyberbullying.

When first encountering the niche scenarios and extensive guidance offered on MIC's online portal, I was both fascinated and surprised. As someone who "grew up" with the Internet in the United States, I did not recall encountering such detailed guidance on the webpages of government entities. Even in the present day, I notice a lack of similar guides when browsing the official sites of U.S. entities that would provide similar resources, such as the Department of Justice and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. In fact, it was difficult for me to locate webpages dedicated specifically to youths. The webpages were full of jargon—when youth safety was discussed, the webpage content was often targeted towards parents. Nonprofit organizations were more likely to provide resources geared specifically for youths and classroom initiatives, such as NetSmartz program offered by the National Center for

Missing and Exploited Children. MIC's detailed and accessible guidance can be interpreted as one dimension of Japan's extensive public health infrastructure.

Platforms have also implemented their own initiatives centering on safety and wellbeing. Several of these initiatives, such as Instagram's decision in early December 2019 to ask new users for their date of birth to prevent underage people from joining the platform, were enforced globally (Instagram 2019a). However, several initiatives were localized differently. As an avid user of Instagram in a U.S. context prior to my fieldwork, I noticed that Instagram Japan bore more public and accessible campaigns than the United States. On December 5th, 2019, Instagram Japan published a guide for safe and secure usage of Instagram. The guide, titled "Let's Learn about Safe Usage in a Fun Way! An Instagram Guide for Everyone (*Anzen na tsukaikata o tanoshiku manabō! Minna no Instagram gaido*)," was developed from the content and responses of high school and college students' participation in the "Instagram Safety Workshop" hosted on October 28th, 2019. The tips within the guide range from discussions on how to express your true self via the use of the "Close Friend" affordance on Stories to discussions on how to create your own safe network via the restriction of comments. These tips were accompanied by brightly colored illustrations by Isomoto Akari, a college student artist known as Redfish (@i_am_redfish) who is also popular among youths. Instagram Japan also distributed physical copies of the guidebook at Harajuku Station from December 14th to December 15th (Instagram 2019). Harajuku seems to be a prominent area of focus for Instagram Japan's safety efforts due to its status as a youth hub. Beginning on February 10th, 2020, Instagram Japan sponsored a six-day display of eleven posters in Harajuku Station centering on safe use of the platform. The posters, also illustrated by Redfish, highlighted features of Instagram that promote safe and secure use. For example, the sample poster within Instagram's press release draws attention to the affordances that allow users to regulate their time on platform—for example, the ability to receive a reminder notification when users have exceeded their intended daily quota of use (Instagram 2020b). I was surprised by this public initiative—in my years of using Instagram in a U.S. context, I have never noticed public displays centering on safety. We thus see that the

localization of global platforms in Japan also involves an integration into larger infrastructures in Japanese society—in this case, public health.

The affect of safety messages on Japanese SNS sometimes differed from the affect of similar messages in the U.S. version of these SNS. While perusing TikTok during my fieldwork, warning videos appeared whenever I scrolled for an extended period of time. Such warning videos also appear in TikTok U.S. However, I noticed that the general affect of these videos differed. While TikTok U.S. offers rather playful nudges about extended usage (“Whoa! You’ve been scrolling for a while!”), the nudging offered by TikTok was soft yet forlorn. In one video posted by TikTok Japan, a young man explains how he, as a college student who lives by himself, sometimes feels lonely when returning home. While studying he decides to take a “small break”—however, he ends up taking out his device to watch TikToks. He explains that there are times in which he does not know if he cannot sleep because he is watching TikToks, or if he is watching TikToks because he cannot sleep. He ends with the following invitation: “Take a breather every now and then...won’t you take it easy?”⁸⁷ In another video, a stylish man with a cross earring mentions that he must not be the only one who thinks that he might be using TikTok excessively. He brings up the example of watching TikToks for extended periods of time even when there is a test the next day. He concludes: “Take a breather every now and then...won’t you study with me?”⁸⁸

While these initiatives by platforms are admirable, the question of performativity and authenticity arises. Restrictions work against these platforms, which are ultimately capitalist entities. The preventative measures that are introduced by platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have workarounds. For example, after receiving warning videos from TikTok about extended usage, the user is not prevented from swiping to the next video. In the case of

⁸⁷ *Tama ni wa ikinuite, yukkuri shimasen ka?* たまには息抜いて、ゆっくりしませんか？ The original video can be accessed via the following link: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSdJ74g5m/?k=1>.

⁸⁸ *Tama ni wa ikinuite...issho ni, benkyō shimasen ka?* たまには息抜いて...一緒に、勉強しませんか？ The original video can be accessed via the following link: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSdJ74uND/?k=1>.

Instagram, the user can easily readjust or ignore restrictive timers. Thus, initiatives by the platforms themselves can be interpreted as an act of performativity to evade accountability or public judgement for “not doing enough” to ensure wellbeing. Despite these dubious underpinnings, public health discourse on online safety seems more pervasive and accessible in Japan than the United States. I believe that the United States can learn much from this.

Concerns, Anxieties, and the “Lost Generation”

During my fieldwork, I encountered a special issue of a magazine catered to mothers, *Haha no Tomo*, that featured articles on smartphone use and childrearing (Figure 4.5). One of the articles provided an introduction to *sumaho izonshō* written by psychiatrist Higuchi Susumu, who has written on smartphone gaming addiction and currently serves as the Director of the Kurihama Medical and Addiction Center. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the labor performed by mothers in preventing harm and managing risk has constituted a theme of interest in studies on contemporary Japan. In my interviews with adults, mothers in particular noted smartphone addiction as a serious concern.



Figure 4.5: A physical copy of the special issue of *Haha no Tomo* acquired during fieldwork. Photograph taken by the author.

Televised talk shows known as “wide shows” sometimes addressed these anxieties. In February 2020, I stumbled upon an episode of the wide show by the name of *Uwasa no hogoshakai* (ウワサの保護者会; Parents’ Association for Rumors). Within this episode, the participants in the wide show discussed children’s whereabouts afterschool.⁸⁹ The episode was a commentary of the lack of *ibasho*—places of belonging—among children. In one case study, a mother explains that her daughter Rara, a sixth-year elementary school student, is in the stage of dressing up and chasing the latest trends. Rara’s *ibasho* constitute family restaurants and shopping centers. The cost of this sociality adds up over time. Rara’s mother shares that she is able to access photographs taken by Rara during her hangouts with friends—for example, the photographs that Rara takes during *purikura* sessions with her friends automatically appear on the family iCloud account. In another case study, a mother mentions that her son’s *ibasho* is right outside of her apartment’s *genkan* (entryway). Her son and his friends play video games right outside of the apartment, using his household’s WiFi. In a third case study, a mother explains that her son’s *ibasho* is *within* his smartphone, as his friends meet virtually due to the busyness of their entrance exam preparations. When researching *Uwasa no hogoshakai*, I found that there was a broadcast in early March 2019 that featured parents’ concerns about their children’s SNS use. Thus, it appears that digital technologies are a recurring theme of interest.⁹⁰

High schoolers, college students, and *shakaijin* in their early to mid-20s confessed that they perceive themselves as falling under categories of excessive use. At the same time, young interlocutors noted that behaviors such as excessive use are pervasive and perhaps inevitable. “But isn’t *everyone* addicted?” Lulu interjected during one conversation. Interlocutors such as Lulu noted that concerns of smartphone addiction reached their height in the early 2000s when the term first became popularized in public discourse but have since diminished. I eventually came to the realization that perhaps a more productive conversation is not *if* one is “addicted,”

⁸⁹ A full summary of the episode can be accessed via the program’s blog: <https://www.nhk.or.jp/hogosya-blog/100/420153.html>.

⁹⁰ A full summary of the episode can be accessed via the program’s blog: <https://www.nhk.or.jp/hogosya-blog/100/313774.html>.

but rather *how* one can deal with the pitfalls of “addiction” or excessive use—especially as these categories of use are perceived as pervasive and even inevitable.

What do we make of the fear that envelopes smartphone and SNS use? Is this fear indicative of something more insidious? What accounts for the dissonance in concern among different generations? The fear, I argue, is an ongoing manifestation of the anxiety that accompanied the economic downturn of the 1990s and the subsequent dissipation of previously “stable” life course patterns. In her pivotal work, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*, Marcy C. Brinton discusses the impact of the economic downturn on “the lost generation,” or the cohort of young people growing up in the 1990s. During Japan’s period of high economic growth from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, life course had been “standardized,” and was characterized by both a “strong breadwinner ideology” and a nuclear family system (13). Furthermore, this standardization featured “established pathways from school to work and from work into marriage,” pathways which were achieved by “studying hard and mastering appropriate behaviors and ways of speaking” (18). Allison (2013) uses the term “Japan, Inc.” to describe this postwar system, as this term embodies “the corporatization of its social economy and the ‘marriage’ between the social factory at home and the postindustrial factory at work” (21). Attachment to *ba*, or a social location, was pivotal to life course and career mobility in postwar Japan. For example, schools played a huge role in ensuring graduates’ entry into workplaces—several workplaces, in turn, depended on certain schools for scouting new employees.

As the social fabric of postwar Japan began to disintegrate following the burst of the Japan’s financial bubble in 1991, the leverage of *ba* also began to disintegrate. Brinton explains how this erosion of *ba* impacted the lost generation:

Lost in the transition from school to work, the lost generation is a reflection of a deeper transition in Japanese society—a transition away from social institutions that helped guide individuals from one life stage to another. These life stages have been deeply connected in Japan to what we might call the “social locations” in which individuals find security and a sense of identity. The rupture in the social institutions guiding individuals

into such social locations has profound implications, as it requires individuals to master new sets of skills to navigate what have become rocky and at times lonely transitions. The costs of these recent institutional changes in Japan have been borne mainly by the young, especially the least educated among them. (Brinton 2011, 2).

Accompanying this loss of *ba* was a loss in *ibasho*, or spaces of belonging. Allison discusses the sense of unbelonging (*ibasho ga nai*) as a sign of precarity in “liquified Japan,” or contemporary Japan (2013, 14). Furthermore, she characterizes this normative condition and crisis of unbelonging as “ordinary refugeeism” (47).

Digital embeddedness—excessive and otherwise—is narrated as “inevitable” not only because of the evolution of digital technology itself, but also because Japanese society has shifted in a way that *ba* and *ibasho* are amorphous, fraught, or nonexistent. Smartphone and SNS *become* one’s *ibasho*. The notion of the digital as *ibasho* is difficult for older generations to understand—they benefitted from stable life courses, institutions, and *ba* that were largely “analog” or “physical.” But this is not the case for the “lost generation.” This dissonance in understanding yields anxiety and pathology. In the wake of disequilibrium in contemporary Japan, SNS and smartphones may be considered to be transitional objects in that they allow teens to navigate the liminal period of adolescence and “carve out an identity that is not defined solely by family ties” (boyd 2014, 17). Parental anxieties over the transformation of digital technologies as *ibasho* largely center on perceived norms of participating in public life (10).

Anxieties of smartphone-related danger and risk remind me of *hikikomori* discourse. In fact, the two were sometimes linked in conversations with interlocutors. *Hikikomori* (the “withdrawn”) are individuals, typically youths, who isolate themselves in their homes and avoid social interactions for months on end (Borovoy 2008; Saitō 1998). Borovoy (2008) notes that “antipsychology” or “antipsychiatry” bias in Japan leads to the framing of conditions such as social withdrawal as manageable through self-discipline and exposure to a “healthful” environment (554). This, Borovoy explains, results in the blurring of what is considered to be normal or pathological:

The heavy emphasis on “mainstreaming” and the powerful association of health with social integration creates a situation in which the line between the normal and the pathological—between a problem that is manageable through behavior modification or socialization and one that requires more specific or totalizing forms of care—becomes difficult to draw. Hikikomori may be a manifestation of a system that has worked hard to “mainstream” the vast middle swath of citizens into middle-class values and social life in Japan, but offers chiefly “custodial” forms of care for those who simply cannot accommodate the demands of normal, everyday life. (554-555)

Both Brinton and Allison explain that *hikikomori* discourse was part of the moral panic directed towards youth during the economic downturn in 1990s Japan. Other anxieties included the “parasitic singles” who financially depended on their parents, “hedonistic consumer spending” among youths, and unstable work patterns among young people (Allison 2013, 30; Brinton 2011, 1). I would suggest that moral panic related to smartphone and SNS can be added to this anxiety mix.

Brinton states that social institutions “bear an intimate connection to the way people formulate their identity and navigate in society writ large” (2011, 167). She suggests that the precarity of the times has caused young people in Japan to “turn inward and blame themselves, questioning their own abilities and losing their self-confidence” (183). I disagree with the latter claim. My interactions with young interlocutors have demonstrated that they are very aware that *the system* is to blame. Adopting an intergenerational approach to digital anxiety can yield much insight into the context from which this anxiety is arising—and by context, I mean particular social structures and life stage. While addiction, excessive use, and remaining “closed off” to in-person sociality were narrated as serious issues of concern among adults, issues related to sociality—particularly miscommunication and cyberbullying—were vocalized as more serious issues of interest among young interlocutors. These issues seemed to have more of a visceral, immediate impact on interlocutors’ lives, and the lives of their peers and loved ones.

Cyberbullying became a center point of interviews conducted after the suicide of Kimura Hana. Miscommunication was narrated as a difficulty prior to pandemic times, but *especially* during the heightened digital mediation of the pandemic. Despite assumptions about smartphone users

being unconscious victims of digital (de)vices, smartphone users and young people in particular are aware of the pitfalls of the very platforms that they use. Furthermore, users are cognizant that they depend on or use their devices to a potentially excessive degree. Here, I will transition to the narrations of risk and concern among three families, along with more general narrations by youths and adults.

Mixed Feelings: Conversations with Interlocutors

The Wada Family

The Wada Family is a family of four living in Chiba prefecture. I visited their family home quite often throughout my fieldwork, especially when I wanted to spend time away from Tokyo. At times, the Wada Family even commuted to Yotsuya to spend afternoons with me. I had known the Wada Family prior to my fieldwork, and was especially close to Maria, the mother. Maria had taken up a position as a contract worker (*keiyakushain*) at the start of my fieldwork. Her husband, Keisuke, works as a salaryman for an IT company. Their son, Takashi, had just started his first year of university in another prefecture. Their daughter, Himawari, was about to enter her final year of high school. Both Maria and Keisuke used to run a family blog, especially following the birth of their children. Although children usually receive mobile phones during elementary school and middle school, Maria and Keisuke did not allow their children to have personal mobile phones until they were in high school. Both parents placed time restrictions on their children's smartphone and SNS use—for example, both children were not allowed to bring their phones into their room at bedtime because this would impact their sleep and study schedule. Maria commented, however, that her daughter now brings her phone into her room to use as an “alarm”—she does not know for sure if her daughter is secretly using LINE or other SNS while in bed. Maria and Keisuke can no longer monitor their son's use since he has moved away for college.

Maria and Keisuke bore different attitudes towards their children's SNS and smartphone usage. In my conversations with Maria, she expressed deep concern over the impact of

smartphone use on the body and brain. Maria commented that she had noticed that her son's posture had changed—his neck and shoulders now slump forward, and he seems to be developing *nekoze* (hunchback). Maria was also concerned about the *denjiha*, or electromagnetic waves, that may emanate from smartphones. Maria's views on SNS and smartphone use among youths were largely negative. She spoke of her son's gaming habits, which she viewed as excessive, and his excessive use of his smartphone. Maria was also concerned about the impact of smartphones and SNS on her son's mental health, especially during his recent breakup. She recalled how devastated he was when he saw that his ex-girlfriend had posted a photo of herself dining with a mysterious young man. Maria also commented on the impact of her son's smartphone use on personal feelings of presence. "Even though we're together, it doesn't feel that way," she lamented when discussing her son's visits back home during school breaks. She explained that her daughter does not play games but does use LINE and Instagram—which she personally viewed as a waste of time.

Maria's concerns about SNS and smartphone usage among youths also centered on miscommunication. Maria explained that she believes that it is difficult to understand the feelings of others when communicating via LINE, compared to in-person communication. At the same time, Maria mentioned that the advantage of SNS and smartphones was the ability to stay in touch with others regardless of distance. She recalled the crucial role that LINE had played in allowing her to stay in touch with her daughter during her study abroad program in Canada—without LINE, she would have had to pay exorbitant fees for international phone calls. LINE continued to play a central role in Maria's life, especially she was coping with her son's decision to go away for college. Maria spoke about how she would feel warm whenever her son sent photos of his cooking. She pulled out her smartphone and showed me a photo album that she had created in her smartphone dedicated to photos that her son had sent her.

Keisuke's comments demonstrated a combination of both calm acceptance and skepticism. "It can't be helped (*shō ga nai*)," he calmly responded when asked about his children's SNS and smartphone use. Keisuke explained that while adults use SNS and

smartphones because they must do so for daily tasks, children use it for “fun.” Adults, he explained, do not understand their children’s use, and thus exhibit concern—perhaps to an excessive degree. “We fear what we don’t understand,” Keisuke began. “If people tried to understand [youth usage] more, there may be less criticism.” Keisuke noted that smartphone-related anxieties are contemporary iterations of anxieties related to the PocketBell and personal computers. Keisuke recalled that when he first started his job in 1991, he bought a personal computer for his desk with his own money because it was useful. However, since personal computers were not popular or ubiquitous at the time, he was criticized by other employees because they did not understand the device and its affordances. In sharing this experience, Keisuke implied that the smartphone is just the next stage in the evolution of new technology (*atarashi gijutsu no shinpo*) and associated anxieties.

When sharing his opinions on the positive and negative aspects of SNS and smartphone usage, Keisuke highlighted communicative benefits vis-à-vis self-discovery. These technologies bridge distances and facilitate a “real time” air. Keisuke commented that in the past, one truly felt the distance between people; nowadays, people, places, and things feel “closer.” The lack of distance facilitated by connectivity can also be a pitfall. Keisuke vocalized the concern that individuals do not have much of a chance to (re)discover oneself and (re)consider values.⁹¹ Keisuke explained that in the past, individuals could engage in these processes of self-discovery by going on solo trips. However, nowadays, one is not really “alone” even when taking solo trips. Individuals take their smartphones with them during trips, so there is still a degree of constant connectivity—in other words, they are still “always on.”

I noticed that the theme of self-discovery also appeared during my conversations with Takashi during his visits home. Takashi was approaching the end of his first year in university. Prior to starting my fieldwork, I learned that Takashi had taken some time off after graduating from high school to retake the national college entrance examination. He was not pleased with

⁹¹ Keisuke used the specific phrase: *jibun o mitsumenaosu*.

his placement, so he decided to spend a year as a *rōnin*—he would work part-time while studying intensely for the exam.⁹² Takashi would eventually gain admission to several of his top choice universities. He selected a university in a prefecture far from Chiba—a decision that impacted his mother, who had hoped that he would enroll in a university in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

During our conversations, Takashi spoke with a level of maturity and reflexivity beyond his years. An unexpected turn in one of our conversations was his candid discussion of his past addiction to gaming on his smartphone. Takashi's definition of *izonshō* centered on the disruption of one's life rhythm due to intense use. Furthermore, Takashi discussed addiction as the centering of smartphones as the main feature or facilitator of sociality. Takashi confessed that he would game for seven to eight hours daily during his first year of living alone as a college student. His friends exhibited concern about his gaming. During a group trip to Fukuoka, they took the opportunity to express their concerns to Takashi. "You're wasting your life away (*jinsei ni muda shite iru zō*)!" One friend had exclaimed to him. Takashi explained to me that his friends' intervention deeply affected him. He changed his "life rhythm" (*seikatsu no rizumu*), reducing his smartphone use to less than two hours per day. I would also learn that his father, Keisuke, had also counseled him regarding the importance of creating memories and building social circles in person rather than virtually. As one of my only interlocutors who identified as a gamer, my conversations with Takashi were an opportunity to learn about perceived risks associated with gaming. Takashi mentioned that he had made friends online through gaming, but he had never met them offline—what he referred to as *enka* (エンカ), the youth slang for such offline encounters.⁹³ Takashi had, however, met Twitter users offline. This *enka* took place because these Twitter users attended Takashi's *yobikō*, a cram school (*juku*) specifically for *rōnin*. Takashi mentioned that *enka* can be dangerous but can also be awkward, especially if the person's online personality is different from their offline personality.

⁹² A literal translation of *rōnin* is "wanderer."

⁹³ *Enka* is derived literally from "encounter."

Takashi spoke honestly of both the benefits and consequences of SNS and smartphones, characterizing these technologies as neither pure forces of good nor evil. According to Takashi, SNS and smartphones use had myriad benefits—for example, the ability to connect with individuals regardless of physical distance and the ability to obtain information with ease. When discussing the caveats of these technologies, it was clear that Takashi was drawing upon his own personal experiences. Aside from his own history of gaming addiction, Takashi also mentioned that he noticed that other first-year college students in his dormitory spend most of their time indoors—a dynamic that, according to Takashi, is fodder for *izonshō*.

Himawari, Takashi's sister, was preparing to take her college entrance examination during my fieldwork. Himawari's smartphone usage thus featured a study app called "Study Sapuri," which her school provided for free. This app became critical following the onset of the pandemic, as in-person classes were cancelled. Himawari would later tell me that LINE, too, would become crucial to her education. Since her class could not meet in person, her class would form a group LINE chat for announcements related to assignments and exams. Himawari revealed that while the main LINE group included the teacher, the students also made a separate LINE group that excluded the teacher. Digital education had its hiccups. In one instance, several students did not know that their exam had changed to an earlier start time because they did not check the class LINE group. Himawari ruminated on the implications of navigating education during pandemic times without a smartphone or a stable WiFi connection.

Himawari spoke of the beneficial ways in which SNS and smartphones mediate conversations and connections. As an avid user of Instagram, Himawari appreciated the ability to see what her friends were up to; furthermore, she treasured the birthday messages and warm comments she would receive from friends. In response to my question regarding how her life would change if she did not have SNS, she mused that she would not be able to have conversations about the latest trends (*hayari*) or occurrences in her friends' lives. Instagram seemed to be crucial in this regard. At the same time, she worried about the impact of SNS like

Instagram on self-confidence and comparison. As I will explain later in this chapter, other youth interlocutors vocalized concern about perfectionism and the need for external validation.

Himawari's concerns about SNS and smartphone revolved around cyberbullying and harassment, which differed from Takashi's focus on addiction. Although Himawari had not personally experienced cyberbullying, she commented that she has seen multiple incidents of cyberbullying on TikTok and Twitter. For Himawari, the frightening dimension of SNS was the fact that users make comments that they would never say in person. Himawari mentioned that the hateful comments she had seen on TikTok made her wonder if the users were Japanese—she commented that she did not know that Japanese individuals could be that cold.⁹⁴ Himawari also discussed the leaking of personal information, or “doxing,” on Twitter as another frightening phenomenon.⁹⁵ She commented on how users can find residential addresses, school names, and other identifiers just from the little information posted online. Himawari mentioned that the prevalence of cyberbullying and doxing would cause her to remove Twitter and TikTok from her smartphone. However, it was unclear if other factors caused this removal, or if she still accesses these platforms via web browsers.

During one of my visits to the Wada household, Maria sat near Himawari as I asked questions pertaining to my research. Maria overheard one of our conversations about Instagram, and then came over to the living room couch with her tablet. Maria had been in the process of making an Instagram account and wanted my help with the settings. Once I helped Maria, she began to look through suggested accounts. Maria became enamored by the Instagram account for a Sheltie puppy, which bore a striking resemblance to the family dog. Maria read the puppy's “bio” as listed on its profile. Noticing that the puppy was born in the same prefecture as the family dog, she began to pull out a binder full of the pedigree documents for the family dog. I found this entrancement to be endearing. Maria would later follow me on Instagram. I believe

⁹⁴ It is interesting to consider how the dissonance between the bold comments made by users online versus restraint exhibited offline becomes entangled with national identity discourse.

⁹⁵ Himawari referred to doxing as *tokuteihan*. I have also seen the word *tokuteichū* used to describe doxing.

that she may have followed her daughter, too. I felt a pang of guilt about this, since Himawari may have wanted her account to remain private from her parents' eyes. However, this was also beyond my control due to ethics. Since Himawari was a minor by IRB standards, I needed Maria's consent before speaking to Himawari. Maria would sometimes linger when I interviewed her, and she had a right to do this as Himawari's legal guardian. As Himawari often spoke candidly to me even in her mother's presence, I did not think that Maria's lingering impacted her responses. But I could not be too sure, and this is a difficulty of ethnographic research with minors.

My conversations with the Wada Family revealed that their children were aware of the caveats alongside the benefits of these technologies. I gleaned that this awareness was not only a result of the parenting styles of Maria and Keisuke, but also because both Himawari and Takashi learned of their own accord: Himawari, from observing Twitter scandals, and Takashi, from his own experience of gaming addiction.

The Ono Family

The Ono Family is also a family of four living in Chiba prefecture. I had met the Ono Family prior to my fieldwork and connected with the family frequently during my year in the field. Nanao, the mother, works as a classroom helper. Her husband, Hiro, works as a sports instructor; however, I had met him only a handful of times due to his work schedule. Hajime, their son, was approaching the end of his first year of high school. Their daughter Hitomi was entering her final year of high school and seemed quite stressed about her preparations for college entrance examinations. At the start of my fieldwork, my conversations with Hitomi were more frequent than my conversations with Hajime; however, towards the end, this dynamic flipped.

When first asking Nanao if I could speak to Hitomi and Hajime about their SNS and smartphone usage, I provided a printout of some sample questions that I would be interested in asking. Nanao gently took the paper and read the questions closely. She began to read some of

the questions out loud, while directing pointed eye contact at Hitomi. “How many hours or minutes do you use your phone?” She asked aloud. She then answered for Hitomi, although without asking Hitomi: “All the time (*zutto*)!” During my multiple visits to the Ono household, I was intrigued by the manner in which Hajime and Hitomi responded to Nanao’s concerns about smartphone and SNS usage. During one visit, Nanao commented about the recent diet boom among high schoolers. She conveyed her concern about this boom and its impact on her daughter. Hitomi had mentioned to Nanao on several occasions that she did not want to eat because her face was “getting fat.” Nanao expressed her firm belief in high school as a time for nourishment and growth, and contemplated the origin of this boom. She noted the advertisements sponsored by a fitness chain called RIZAP that were starting to appear within trains. I recalled seeing these advertisements during my daily commutes and even on television—indeed, the women within the advertisements were very thin, and sometimes their ribs were visible. Nanao then wondered aloud if the diet boom was also due to the spread of diet information on Instagram among high schoolers. Nanao began to speak about *shōnin yokkyū*, or the need for external validation, social approval, and/or praise. As this was the first time I encountered the phrase, I asked Nanao to elaborate. “In Japan, people aren’t really praised...when you’re little, you’re told ‘that’s bad!’ (*dame!*) or ‘do this!’ (*kore yarinasai!*),” she began. Nanao brought in her experience as a classroom helper, proposing that children act rambunctious or mischievous in school because they are not adequately praised at home—she noted that the students in her class calm down when receiving praise. Nanao proposed that perhaps the key to ameliorating *shōnin yokkyū* is giving more consistent praise beginning in childhood.

Hitomi returned home a few hours later after this conversation with Nanao. Hitomi began to show me the videos that she had been watching on TikTok. One of the videos featured choreography by BlackPink, a K-Pop group that had been popular at the time of my fieldwork. She then showed me her attempt to do a coordinated dance that had been trending on TikTok with her little cousin. The choreography was intricate, involving timed coordination of body movements with fast-paced music. Bewildered—and perhaps envious of their hand-eye

coordination, which I lack—I asked Hitomi about their process. Hitomi commented that recording TikTok dances takes time and practice. She began to show me some coordinated TikTok dances that she had done with her high school acquaintances in the bathroom of a mall. As I spoke to Hitomi about SNS and smartphone use among high schoolers, Nanao brought up our previous conversation on diet culture. With a firm tone, Hitomi corrected her mother and explained that high schoolers participate in diets of their own volition, purpose, and benefit—not because of the influence of SNS. Hitomi mentioned that the number of people who say that they want to quit Instagram is increasing. These people, according to Hitomi, reject *instabae* culture, want to “live in the world,” and do not feel a need to post. Nanao listened intently, intrigued by Hitomi’s explanation. I admired Hitomi’s reclamation of agency, although I also wondered if this was a form of self-denial.

Nanao’s intrigue was also evident in her requests to peek at the TikTok and YouTube videos that her children showed me. In one instance, Hitomi showed me a popular TikTok account belonging to a Kim Jong-un impersonator by the name of *Purin Shōgun*.⁹⁶ In the videos within the account, the impersonator held a tapioca drink while playing with a big red button meant to symbolize an impending missile launch. Horrified, Nanao exclaimed: “He’s doing too much (*yarisugi*)!” Both Nanao and Hitomi commented that the impersonator should stop his antics while people are still laughing, otherwise he may get murdered. In another instance, as Hajime and I were laughing amongst ourselves about a recent video uploaded by the popular YouTube channel “Fischers,” Nanao asked for a synopsis of the video. Hajime then explained the video in vivid detail—the extent of which insinuated that the video had left a lasting impression. Nanao listened with amazed curiosity.

Cyberbullying was a topic of concern for Nanao, and it seemed that both Hitomi and Hajime had experienced cyberbullying to some degree. During one visit to the household, I learned that Hajime was getting bullied at school by one student. The bullying also occurred

⁹⁶ A literal translation of this name is “General Pudding.”

online—a student used another classmate’s LINE account to send Hajime malicious messages. It was unclear if this student was the bully himself or just part of the bully’s entourage. Nanao characterized cyberbullying as primarily enacted by those who want to speak ill of others but wish to remain anonymous. She postulated that bullies act up because they do not get enough attention at home, perhaps due to parents’ busy schedules. Nanao mentioned that if she were to experience cyberbullying, she would simply ignore the cruel comments. However, she sympathized that it must be hard for today’s youths to do this, as they are growing up with these technologies. Nanao shared that Hitomi is currently experiencing some high school drama. Hitomi had told her friend that another person is a bit extreme and uptight (*kitsui*), and somehow that information got back to the person in question. The person then messaged Hitomi on LINE stating, “I heard you were bad-mouthing me!” Now Hitomi is obsessing over who possibly told the person. I would later hear Hitomi complain about this situation to her mother. When hearing Nanao speak about Hitomi’s situation, Hajime chimed in and said that he does not understand how girls and women still hang with each other even if they hate each other. He recalled how two of his female friends told him that they hate each other, although the next day he saw them hanging, talking, and smiling together. “That’s so scary!” He exclaimed aloud, recalling his reaction. I started laughing uncontrollably. His frank opinion on this common phenomenon—of which I had been both victim and culprit during high school—was refreshing. Hajime guessed that in his sister’s case, her friend probably hates her and thus was the one who spread the rumor. “With guys, it’s easy...it’s clear when someone hates you.” Hajime explained. According to Hajime, boys apparently just do not hang with each other when they hate each other. On the topic of cyberbullying, I asked Hajime if he had noticed any bullying on TikTok, as another high schooler had mentioned this to me. He answered in the affirmative. “The comments section...” he began, but his voice trailed off, which insinuated the magnitude of the cyberbullying occurring on the platform.

Time spent online was yet another topic of conversation during my visits to the Ono household. I empathized with Hitomi and Hajime about time spent on TikTok—all three of us

had the common experience of watching TikToks for hours on end, unaware of the rapid passage of time. Nanao nodded her head. Although she did not personally use TikTok, she understood that the short intervals of each video makes it easy for one to lose track of time. Hitomi had deleted TikTok and Instagram so that she can concentrate on studying for college entrance examinations. However, she redownloads Instagram at night to quickly peruse her feed and content of interest before deleting the platform again. When speaking with Nanao during the school closures brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, she expressed concern over Hajime's sleep schedule and length of time spent gaming on his phone. I would later ask Hajime about his time spent online, especially during the school closure or *corona yasumi*:

Hajime: When school is in session, I come home at around 7 PM so...maybe around two and a half hours? But during vacations, I'm home for the most part...so...I'm online all day. [nervous laughter]

Nanao (overhearing from the kitchen): [nervous shriek] *Kowai! Kowai!* [laughs]

Kimberly: [laughs]

Hajime: I'm basically using it all day...

Kimberly: So, around how many hours?

Hajime: On bad days...16 hours...

Nanao: [shrieks]

Hajime: But at most, around 10 hours.

Nanao: [shrieks]

I asked Hajime if he could share his ScreenTime via his iPhone's general settings. Indeed, his daily average was listed at 11 hours and 25 minutes. As I demonstrate in the conclusion of this dissertation, Nanao would liken this excessive use to a virus: "Smartphone virus is scarier than coronavirus!"

The Hayashi Family

The Hayashi Family is a family of three living in Tokyo. Shiori is a single mother of two children in elementary school, Saki and Shinji. Saki is a fan of YouTube, while Shinji is a fan of the online multiplayer game called Fortnite. Shiori was working as a secretary at the start of my fieldwork, although frequently conveyed her dream of starting her own business. Shiori's dream would become a reality after my departure from the field. From time to time, Shiori would message me on Instagram or LINE to ask for English translations for her shop's Instagram profile, which I happily provided.

As a single mother, Shiori was often quite busy. This was especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, as she suddenly had to homeschool her children because of the school closures. Prior to the pandemic, Shiori and I would sometimes meet in person to catch up. These catch ups would take on the form of video chats during the pandemic. When video chatting with Shiori one evening, I giggled upon noticing that Saki and Shinji were posing behind their mother's field of vision, raising their fingers to form bunny ears behind her head. Shiori, unbothered, answered some questions that I had about her own navigation of her children's phone use. Shiori did not want her children to have a smartphone at first, but this became inevitable because of its communicative affordances. Her children, like most children in Japan, commuted to school on their own. Smartphones were thus necessary for communication and emergencies, and granted Shiori some peace of mind (*anshin*). Shiori explained that she controls the friend requests that her children receive on LINE. However, she is not sure if she will be able to fully control this when Saki and Shinji enter middle school.

Shiori raised the concern of stalkers and the leaking of personal information. She found it frightening that some minors show their faces on platforms such as Instagram. She worried that individuals could pinpoint personal whereabouts from the details within minors' posts and videos. I was particularly curious about Shinji's gaming, as I knew that Fortnite sometimes required communication with other players. Shiori confirmed that Shinji does indeed play with other players—in fact, he recently was gifted a microphone and can now communicate with

these players. Shiori was surprised to find out that Shinji speaks in English with other players, requesting guns and ammunition in their English names despite his lack of fluency in English. I asked Shiori if she ever worried about Shinji's conversations with players. Shinji, overhearing our conversation, shared that his teacher had warned his classmates about the dangers of kidnapping from online interactions. Shiori proceeded to lecture Shinji on the importance of not meeting with people or giving any personal information. It turned out that Shinji's username was a combination of his name, birth month, and birthday.

Other Concerns

Interlocutors also voiced concerns about smartphone and SNS use that did not necessarily fall into the realm of cyberbullying or “addiction.” Natsuki, for example, expressed the concern that she is losing the ability to organize or keep track of her thoughts and tasks without the help of her smartphone. To remedy this, Natsuki had purchased a bullet journal along with an informative book that centered on bullet journaling as hobby and practice. Issues of media literacy, misinformation, and disinformation were also discussed by interlocutors, especially following the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁷ Concerns regarding miscommunication were prevalent among youth interlocutors. Several interlocutors mentioned that emoji and stamps are sometimes hard to interpret, as their intended meaning and use differ from person to person.⁹⁸ Furthermore, interlocutors commented that it is sometimes difficult to “read” the general mood (*kūki o yomu*) of their digitally mediated conversations—in other words, an inability to read the (chat)room.

The topics of miscommunication, misreading, and overanalyzing were even featured in the “Communication in 2030” exhibit curated by the Miraikan Visionaries Camp, as explained in the introduction of this dissertation. The camp's “Emotional Conflict Laboratory,” a team consisting of second year high school students Ikemoto Jiro, Sugiyama Mone, and Takiguchi

⁹⁷ I will discuss issues of misinformation and disinformation in the conclusion of this dissertation.

⁹⁸ This concern was also echoed by the participants within the study conducted by Ohashi et al 2017.

Komugi, created a series of display panels centering on the imperfections of communication (*komyunikēshon no fukanzen*). The team's mission statement centers on the inevitability of imperfect communication, as no medium can perfectly convey intended messages, and the necessity for individuals to understand and accept imperfection. At the start of their exhibit, the team includes the following message to visitors:

We believe that communication challenges will continue no matter how much technology advances. Thus, we asked, "Is there a perfect form of communication?". We believe the way to approach the future is by accepting the imperfections of communication. We will be happy if this exhibit becomes an opportunity for everyone to reconsider their own perspectives. (Miraikan Visionaries Camp, 2019)

As part of the exhibit, the team juxtaposed three display panels that feature handwritten explanations of the advantages and disadvantages of three communicative technologies: telephone, e-mail, and LINE.

The team's discussion of LINE was particularly interesting and relevant to my research. The positive features of LINE, as the primary communication tool for youths today, included the ability to receive and send quick replies, the ability to send photos, videos, and audio messages in a manner similar to e-mail, and the ability to use stamps to convey hard-to-express emotions. The negative consequences that accompany the use of LINE as a communication tool included the annoyance of not receiving a reply even when your message is listed as "read" by the recipient, the "washing away" of important information, the annoyance that accompanies receiving 100 messages, and the peculiar concept of *midoku mushi* in which a message is listed as "unread" but has likely been ignored by the recipient.⁹⁹ These discussions of the imperfections of communication harken to media ideologies and imagined affordances.

⁹⁹ *Midoku mushi* is facilitated by the ability to read previews of a message via notifications on device home screens. Another variant of this phrase is *midoku surū*. LINE users may preview an entire message or conversation by holding down a finger against a chat. Thus, it is possible for a message to be read by a user in a way that does not activate a "read" receipt. This is different from *kidoku surū*, in which a user opens and reads a message but does not respond—the "read" receipt is activated. In English, the closest equivalent is "left on read."

Concerns regarding external validation, likeability, perfectionism, and judgement were also vocalized by interlocutors. Instagram markets itself to potential and current users as a platform in which users can express themselves freely and “be” themselves. Despite this marketing, interlocutors commented on the pressures that accompany their use of Instagram, particularly as this pressure relates to *instabae*, perfectionism, and the quantification of attention. Receiving “likes” on uploaded posts and gaining new followers foster a sense of self-satisfaction (*jiko manzoku*), yet also pressure users to aspire for vibrant, curated aesthetics. Similarly, the loss of followers or a low number of “likes” may impact perceptions of one’s own self-esteem (*jiko hyōka*). Users may compare their own lives to the curated lives of other users online, instilling yet more pressure to perform a certain self or lifestyle (Figure 4.6). Some interlocutors suggested that the “like” button (*ii ne!*) also bears the meaning of *ii nā* (いいな あ〜). While also translated as “How nice!”, there is a tinge of envy that accompanies the phrase: “*Must be nice!*”. This play on words hints at the sentiments of longing and comparison that sometimes motivate the pressing of the “like” button. The term *shōnin yokkyū*, the desire or need for social approval, frequently appeared in my interviews with interlocutors regarding the pitfalls of SNS and Instagram in particular.



Figure 4.6: Image from a board within the “Communication in 2030” exhibit in the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation, or the Miraikan. The board bears the caption: “Needing ‘likes’ is a sickness!”. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

At the start of my fieldwork, Instagram had selected Japan as a region in which it would test out the feature of hiding users’ ability to see the number of likes on other users’ posts. Interlocutors such as Himawari and Hitomi commented on this feature with a sense of relief. “I feel like we can do without Instagram,” Himawari commented.¹⁰⁰ She explained that she uses Instagram mostly because it is popular among her peers. She observed that while uploaded photographs on Instagram are “sparkling” or “shiny” (*kirakira shite iru*), one cannot truly know if the user is actually having fun. “I don’t want people to compare themselves with others after seeing superficial things posted on SNS,” Himawari stated at the end of her interview. Other interlocutors commented that they are aware that Instagram is not necessarily a reality. This realization is compounded by the ability to perform multiple selves via the creation and use of multiple accounts. How can a user know if the profiles that they encounter are tied to a “true” self or an alternate self? On SNS such as Instagram, the self becomes datafied, quantified,

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Himawari had also found savvy ways to view statistics related to her profile—for example, by listing her profile as a solar energy business to gain the ability to view profile insights.

aestheticized, branded, and compartmentalized (Hearn 2008; boyd and Crawford 2012; Belk 2013; Sheth and Solomon 2014; Marwick 2015; Lupton 2016; Knox and Nafus 2018; van der Nagel 2018).

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I was informed by interlocutors that *instabae* was on the decline. According to Hitomi, high schoolers now care more about the taste of food than its appearance. She noted an increase in individuals who wish to quit Instagram, reject *instabae* culture, and refrain from posting frequently. Several interlocutors spoke of their own rejection of *instabae*. Riko discussed her creation of a sub-account on Instagram that doubled as a journal. “I just write what’s on my mind, nothing related to *instabae*,” she explained. This sub-account bears no followers, and she ensures that it stays this way—even declining to show me the account. For Riko, this journal serves as a cathartic means of venting. Audrey, who was in her final year of university at the time of our first conversation and identified as *hāfu*, spoke with frustration of the pressures of *instabae*, using phrases such as “What’s the meaning of *instabae*?” and “Are you escaping from reality?” Audrey spoke of the negative impact of *instabae* on her hobby of Bible journaling, stating that other users in the Bible journaling community tend to focus more on aesthetic than religious intent.¹⁰¹ She deleted her own account due to pressures of perfectionism, though eventually re-made an account with the intent to participate in Instagram’s Bible journaling community on her own terms.

The adults whom I met during my fieldwork lamented the struggles and new pressures that youths must face as a result of the centrality of SNS and smartphones in sociality. One interlocutor commented on the pain of being excluded from a LINE group, a form of bullying known colloquially as *LINE hazushi*. Yuriko, a woman who had become pregnant during my fieldwork and gave birth after I left, mentioned that she was personally interested in my research because it makes her think about what is potentially in store for her unborn child. As she showed me screenshots of a pregnancy app that she had been using to track her pregnancy, I could not

¹⁰¹ This hobby combines study of the Bible with scrapbooking practices. Audrey was the only young interlocutor who openly discussed religion.

help but wonder what new platforms and technologies would be present in her child's life—and which platforms and technologies would form the fabric of his social life.

New Demands on the Self

The aforementioned conversations and vignettes reveal the similarities and differences that exist within the concerns vocalized by intergenerational users of smartphones and SNS. A noteworthy dynamic is young people's candid confessions about their own patterns of use. They confessed that their smartphone and SNS use may fall into concerning categories of behavior but did so with deep reflexivity. This reflexivity demonstrates agency and contests the stereotype of young people as mindlessly using or falling victim to technologies. When asking interlocutors if they had any messages that they would like to convey to the readers of my dissertation or other SNS and smartphone users, a consistent response was the plea to use SNS and smartphones "correctly."¹⁰² These technologies, they explained, are meant to be tools for communication and navigating everyday life—not for harming others or one's own self.

A theme that is worthy of further examination is young people's discussions of the growing embeddedness of SNS and smartphones in the fabric of sociality—for better or for worse. The anecdotes by Hajime, Himawari, and Hitomi raise questions regarding the role of SNS and smartphones in creating and sustaining *nakama*. Cave (2016) defines *nakama* as "a concept that refers to a group of members who belong together" that also "carries connotations of warmth and mutual obligation to help one another" (44). Cave has outlined how emphasis on cultivating *nakama* in a classroom context emerged from the educational reforms that took place in Japan from the late 1980s to the 2000s. These reforms created an educational landscape that differed from that of postwar Japan, which "tended to emphasize group spirit and working

¹⁰² While most interlocutors used the verb *tsukau* (to use), I found it interesting that Keisuke used a variant of the phrase *sumaho to tsukiau*. While this also means "to use a smartphone," I found the use of *tsukiau* to be interesting as a non-native speaker. The term, which I usually encounter in the context of dating or interpersonal relationships, bears an air of "getting by with" or "getting along with."

together” and consequently was perceived as exercising “excessive control over individuals.” The reformed educational system instead marked a move “toward greater emphasis on the individual” (39). The report issued by the Central Council for Education (*Chūō Kyōiku Shingikai*) in 1996 that would form the basis of the reform two years later advocated for the potential role of education in fostering “the ability to learn and to create by oneself” (20). This proposal was based on the Council’s concerns that Japanese children were no longer learning social and emotional skills from family and neighborhood environments, and that Japan needed to “catch up with the West” (20). The reform was met with opposition by individuals who feared that the policy was diverting attention away from academics and instead promoting neoliberal individuation. This opposition was also accompanied by a wave of moral panic about youth immorality and delinquency, along with the “collapse” of the classroom (21). Cave argues, however, that the reforms facilitated autonomy and interdependence within a group rather than individuation. During his decade-long fieldwork in two Japanese schools, Cave noticed a shift from discourse on *shūdan seikatsu*, or “group life,” to an emphasis on *nakama* (40).

The anecdotes from youth interlocutors demonstrate that SNS such as LINE and Instagram play a role in allowing classmates to stay connected and remain attuned to trends and mutual interests. *Nakama* in a classroom context becomes translated into the digital via the creation of group LINE chats. However, it seems that the digital creates a false sense of security among peers that can lead to breaches of trust or destabilize the very fabric of *nakama*. The creation of separate LINE group chats among the same members of a *nakama*, for example, reveals hierarchies of trust and belonging—there is an exclusion from intimacy, communication, and information. The capture and sharing of seemingly confidential LINE conversations via screenshots also signals a breach of trust, as Hitomi’s situation demonstrates. The digital, in other words, creates the illusion that the user is flying beyond the radar of peer group surveillance—or even the eyes of society itself. There is a dissonance here between the perceived autonomy offered by the digital and the reification of surveillance and hierarchy that is actually taking place. This dissonance is not specific to SNS and smartphone usage in Japan.

The growing embeddedness of smartphones and SNS in everyday sociality brings about new demands on the self. It is possible to display an “authentic” self online. However, even this display often requires an intentional selection of an audience—for example, followers within the “Close Friends” setting on Instagram Stories rather than a public feed. This raises the question(s) of what selves are lost and created during processes of mediation. The cultivation of the self may also take place by way of comparative yearning—a piecing together of desired traits, lifestyles, and personae consumed online. Turkle (2017) conceptualizes SNS usage as a psychic carving of multiple selves. Within her case studies, we see various examples of this carving: for example, several of her informants confessed that they had either changed their profiles or created new ones when applying for colleges as a way of maintaining a certain image that would not jeopardize their prospects within the application process (182-83). Turkle states that while each profile bears a unique purpose, there is a necessity for “overlap”—if these profiles do not overlap, “questions of authenticity will arise” (183). Turkle laments that social media has reduced individuals to their profiles, and that increased connectivity has paradoxically led to new forms of solitude (18-19). Although I disagree with Turkle’s pessimism about sociality and technology, I do agree that users have utilized SNS platforms as mechanisms to carve multiple selves.

Conversely, some scholars have argued that SNS and smartphone usage may result in the *erasure* of the self. Han (2017) introduces a new subjectivity of SNS and Internet users: *Homo digitalis*, the “anonymous somebody.” *Homo digitalis* is a “somebody” in that they have a “profile” that they are constantly optimizing (11). The classification *Homo* (human) *digitalis* (finger) points to another defining characteristic of this subjectivity: they are a “handless, fingering human being” (32). Current technology bears features, such as touch screens, that only require fingers. *Homo digitalis* uses their fingers not only to use technology, but to count “likes,” Facebook friends, and other digital quantities of sociality (35). Han characterizes online communities as a “digital swarm,” a mass without a “soul” that consists of faceless individuals

who do not bear individuality or a “profile” (10). The self is erased through anonymity, and this anonymity is often wielded as power online (2-3). This dynamic is evident in cyberbullying.

Social media usage, and the cultivation of profiles in particular, may be characterized as the use of the *self as an object*. Bollas (1987) identifies this as “an object relation where the individual may objectify, imagine, analyse and manage the self through identification with primary others who have been involved in that very task” (41). According to Bollas, this form of object-relation is insightful in that it may facilitate an analysis of “how a person holds and relates to himself as his own internal and external object” (42). The documentation of daily experience and one’s appearance point to the use of the self as an object. Gómez Cruz (2017) draws upon “selfie” culture, or the frequent taking and sharing of self-portraits, to illustrate the ways in which individuals seek to “experience their body in a different way” (303). A notable example is the taking of nude selfies, the editing of these selfies, and the subsequent circulation of these selfies online (303). Gómez Cruz argues that selfies are “always contextual to both the sender and the receiver,” which leads to the photographer’s deliberate use of “positioning (and posing)” in order to “send a message, to someone in mind and for specific purposes” (304). Similarly, Marwick (2015) draws upon the notions of microcelebrity and the attention economy to illustrate the curation of Instagram profiles to appeal to certain audiences. The uploading of photos onto Instagram may be instigated by the illusion that celebrity status is attainable, which thus leads the user to engage in “self-branding” in order to garner “likes” and “followers”—the acquisition of attention boosts the chance for success (140-57). Here, we see the use of the self as an object, along with the projection of success and fame onto images.

I am skeptical of the claims made by Himawari and Hitomi that *instabae* is becoming less popular. Allison characterizes the desire to “feel special” as a defining feature of the ambitions and longings of the “lost generation” (2013, 68). Digital sociality in an age of information capitalism, she suggests, has become a game of popularity embodied by the stakes of “winner versus loser”—youth engage because they do not want to be excluded from the social scene (70). Vibrant visuality has become engrained into the new social fabric, and even within processes of

self-making. While *instabae* as a form of vibrant visuality associated with a particular platform may become less popular, the practice of using vibrant visuality to carve a certain self-image will not cease to be relevant.

With new demands on the self comes an inquiry about the “newness” of this “new.” The pressure to curate and display a certain self is not limited to SNS profiles. This pressure existed long before this technology. As Goffman (1959) explains, everyday sociality is a performance or presentation of various selves. Thus, performances of the self online are just digital iterations of performances of the self. The “new” dimensions that we can consider are the roles of (imagined) affordances and media ideologies in the performance of the self, along with the various actors and institutions that suddenly become involved in this online performance. Bolas explains that the central component of the development of the self is “the person’s narrative relation to himself as an object for reporting and reflecting upon” (60). He states:

A person’s character, then, is in its deepest respects the idiolect of the subject’s ego grammar. It will be observable in the way the person uses others as his objects (ordinary transferences) and how he relates to and handles himself as an object (self as object transference and countertransference). This use of the other and the self as objects is obviously a process, so we may say that character is a process, one that expresses the subject’s historical experience of the primary objects. (60)

We thus see that for Bolas, the self is a process. I would like to add that context is another important dimension within the self as process.

Kondo (1990) advocates for the consideration of the roles of institutions, languages, and social formations in facilitating “the disciplinary production of selves.” Selves, Kondo reminds us, “are crafted through coercions and disciplines, which offer culturally, historically specific pathways to self-realization as well as to domination” (305). Scholars have discussed performances of self in Japanese society as relational and contingent (Bachnik 1994; Kondo 1990; Lebra 2004; Long 2005). Within these studies, linguistics and indexical meaning are centered as case studies of the role of context in self-making. The referents of *uchi* (inside), *soto* (outside), *omote* (front), and *ura* (back) are predominantly used. Bachnik (1994) explains that

these terms represent “*culturally defined* perspectives for self, society, and language in Japan” yet are also linked to “*universally defined* orientations for inside/outside” (7, emphasis in original). Bachnik argues that indexical meaning should be prioritized when studying the self and social life because these referents can reveal much about social context and processes of “ordering” (16). *Uchi/soto* organization, she argues, can index “social distance, status, relationships, settings, topics, affective and epistemological stances of social participants” (25). Takahashi (2010) has extended the indexes of *uchi/soto* to the digital to explain how Japanese youths create and re-create profiles and identities on SNS, suggesting that Mixi can be associated with *uchi* (“me *and* them”), and MySpace with *soto* (“me *with* them”).

I am skeptical of the use of dichotomous linguistic referents such as *uchi/soto*, inside/outside as an explanation for social dynamics in Japan and elsewhere—and *especially* for digital sociality. Ryang (2004) argues that language is not a reliable symbol to utilize when conceptualizing notions of the self: “A mere list of words in itself cannot be justified as having a social effect or function, since the meaning of the word has to be considered in a socially institutionalized usage” (178). I agree with this claim. If linguistic referents are used to explain the self, these referents must be contextualized. But this contextualization is a difficult and never-ending task, as referents and language on a broader scale are always shifting in meaning. Likewise, perceived boundaries of inside/outside are always in flux, especially in the context of the digital. Anonymous users, followers from around the world, and friends made online do not fit neatly into these boundaries. As my conversations with interlocutors demonstrated, the qualifiers of friendship—in other words, who counts as a “friend”—are changing. I do see value in the discussion of the self as contingent and embedded, but I intentionally avoid the use of dichotomies such as inside/outside.

In discussing the self, I am not issuing any prescriptions or generalizations. I am aware of the rather complicated and problematic history of the study of the so-called “Japanese self.”¹⁰³ I

¹⁰³ Doi Takeo’s *The Anatomy of Dependence* is often considered as one of the core texts centering on the notion of the “Japanese self.” Ryang (2004) explains that shortly after its release, the text “was relied

believe that understandings of the self in Japan—including how the self is represented in academic literature—are becoming more variable and less wedded to previous associations with dependency or the “group.” This old association of the self was tied to a social structure and set of academic frameworks that are dissipating. If SNS and smartphones are increasingly serving as *ibasho*, there is a need to examine the new processes of self-making that are taking place, shifting boundaries, and associated demands on the self. There is some continuity with regards to the embeddedness of the self in an interdependent and contingent set of social relations. With regards to change, an interesting site of inquiry is the deceptive nature of the digital as providing a secure means of expressing or revealing one’s true self, or the digital as a mirror of the true self. If the digital is not a haven for the expression and performance of self, then where is?

Conclusion: “We Fear What We Don’t Understand.”

The digital is an easy scapegoat for accidents and incidents. It is a relatively “new” and ever-evolving medium. At the same time, the digital clearly plays *some* role in danger, risk, and harm. Throughout my fieldwork, I often thought about blame and accountability. Who is to blame for the circumstances that bring about issues such as cyberbullying? Are Big Tech companies such as Meta and ByteDance to blame? Are government entities such as MIC at fault for their lack of formal measures that regulate or punish digitally mediated harm? Is society itself to blame for bringing about the conditions that cause individuals to wield anonymity and harm others? Should blame solely be placed on the user?

upon as both a source and method of interpreting the Japanese self”—even today, she explains, the text is still utilized by Japan anthropologists specializing in psychological anthropology (174). American anthropologists’ interest in Doi’s work, particularly his framework of *amae* or dependency and attachment within the mother-infant relationship, marked a shift from interest in Japan’s “aggressiveness” as a wartime enemy to the “passive and dependent” nature of the “Japanese self” (174). While several scholars have attempted to rework Doi’s work and explorations of the concept of the self within Japanese society, they often fall into the “trap” that Ryang describes—namely, that of essentializing Japanese identity. Borovoy (2012) states that what is most concerning about Doi’s work is that his ideas continue to “persuade” and “endure” (295).

I found it interesting that some interlocutors narrated both addiction and cyberbullying as unfortunate yet inevitable side effects of the proliferation of smartphone and SNS usage. Are these side effects truly inevitable? An important question is whether concrete measures can be put into place to curb seemingly “inevitable” side effects. Joel recalled that his high school offered a course once a year about online safety. I asked him if he could explain the content, though in response he exclaimed: “The worst part is that I can’t remember it at all!” He suggested that schools work to include more curricula centering on anti-bullying measures and safety on SNS.

Only time will tell if the various initiatives taken by entities such as MIC will have an impact, and if the momentum of anti-cyberbullying initiatives following the suicide of Kimura Hana will continue. Government entities and corporations in Japan have excitedly promoted Society 5.0 and digitization initiatives, but this promotion should also include protective measures and educational initiatives. This proposal is not limited to Japan: it is applicable to any and all societies that are promoting digital initiatives. The topic of danger and risk associated with smartphones and SNS has been broadcasted globally. The suicides of two women K-Pop stars, Hara and Sulli, who had reported that they had been experiencing cyberbullying was covered beyond South Korea in 2019. We see that manner posters and announcements on the dangers of *aruki sumaho* are growing prevalent elsewhere. I have seen such displays on my own university’s campus that use the phrase “Heads Up, Phones Down” (Figure 4.7). I have also seen an iteration of these displays in Melbourne, Australia via the “Dumb Ways to Die” campaign sponsored by Metro Trains Melbourne.



Figure 4.7: A “Heads Up, Phones Down” sign on Princeton’s campus. Photograph taken by Kimberly Hassel in 2019.

In this chapter, I have outlined various initiatives, representations, and concerns centering on the dangers and risks associated with smartphone and SNS usage. The initiatives centering on safety and prevention of harm largely feature informal nudges and informative guides on individual steps users and parents can take to achieve “good” and “safe” use of these technologies along with peace of mind (*anzen anshin*). Some media representations of danger and risk, particularly in films and dramas, were sensational. Other representations, such as news coverage, brought necessary attention to dangers such as kidnapping. Media representations undoubtedly impacted attitudes. It would be an error, though, to assume that individuals blindly accept these mediated representations without considering the nuances. Parents were understandably concerned about smartphone and SNS use among youths. My conversations with young interlocutors revealed a deep level of reflexivity. This reflexivity contested stereotypes of youths as unknowing victims of these technologies.

Scholars should consider the possibilities that are afforded by the smartphone as an intimate communicative device—which includes the sociality mediated by SNS—while also acknowledging its pitfalls. It is crucial to refrain from painting SNS and smartphones in

reductive terms of good or evil. Along with an acknowledgement of the spectrum of possibilities and pitfalls, scholars must also consider how positionality plays a role in narrations of risk and danger.

In response to my research, some scholars have cautioned that I place too much trust or attention in what young people have to say. It would be an oversight for me to disregard my own potential bias as a digital native and an avid user of SNS prior to and during my fieldwork. I grew up with the Internet—one of the first generations to do so—and navigated strict parental restrictions on my Internet use. Like many American youths, I primarily accessed the Internet via a personal computer. I received my first cellphone in middle school, as my mother was concerned about my safety while commuting to school in Queens, New York. I first started using SNS, primarily Facebook, during high school. I have memories of receiving my first smartphone during my later years in high school, shortly before entering college. As I was attending university far from home, SNS and my smartphone were my primary means of staying connected with family and friends. It has been that way ever since. These technologies were also key to my experience in the field, as they allowed me to stay in touch with my support network back in the United States while also fostering new connections with interlocutors and acquaintances in Japan. My own trajectory as a smartphone and SNS user was similar to that of my young interlocutors.

Of course, I have also had negative experiences related to my SNS and smartphone use, including but not limited to insomnia and a burning desire for “likes.” During my fieldwork, a friend commented that I am perhaps the subject of my own research—he noticed that I would easily get distracted by my phone, or I would spend an excessive amount of time on Instagram. During one virtual classroom visit, a student drew attention to a screenshot of my ScreenTime setting that I had placed in my PowerPoint to give a visual reference to the existence of the setting. The student pointed out that my own ScreenTime was treading on the excessive side, at around 4.5 hours per day. I replied that the screenshot was taken during my fieldwork, a time in which I was spending multiple hours on my phone per day for research purposes—thus, my

ScreenTime was longer than usual. Nevertheless, I was both surprised and amused that the student noticed this and inserted my own patterns of use into the conversation.

Due to my age, I empathize deeply with youths and young women because of our shared experiences.¹⁰⁴ However, throughout my fieldwork I strove to increase the frequency of my interactions with parents and older people. These interactions left a lasting impression and have also informed my analysis. I strive to balance intergenerational concerns in my writing, featuring the concerns of older users while also highlighting the agency of youth. danah boyd concludes the preface of *It's Complicated* with a hope and a poignant point: “As you read this book, my hope is that you will suspend your assumptions about youth in an effort to understand the social lives of networked teens. By and large, the kids are all right. But they want to be understood” (boyd 2014, xi). boyd suggests that while there certainly are teens who do not have a healthy relationship with technology, those who are framed as “addicted” are “actually focused on staying connected to friends in a culture where getting together in person is highly constrained” (18). Similarly, I suggest that perhaps we should take a more nuanced look at “excessive” use. In the case of Japan, we may consider factors such as *ba* and life transitions. The seemingly “excessive” use of technologies during life transitions may constitute a way of coping, in the case of Takashi. Seemingly “excessive” use may also be brought about by the centrality of smartphones in daily life, from commuting to digital pedagogy. As I will explain in the conclusion of this dissertation, the boundaries of “normal” and “pathological” use would become confounded following the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic would cause a renegotiation of multiple terms and concepts that had been integrated into public concerns regarding smartphone and SNS usage—from *hikikomori* to “normal.”



¹⁰⁴ I anticipate that my empathy with interlocutors will continue to take different forms as I enter different life stages.

Mediation: “Why do Americans show their face online?”

Digital paranoia is not necessarily correlated with age. My visit to a university in Chiba prefecture would yield the same response as the older interviewees and parents who had professed their concerns about the dangers of social media and smartphones. It is a rainy October day, and I have just disembarked from a rather long train ride from Yotsuya to Chiba on the Chuo-Sobu Line. I was scheduled to recruit students at a seminar that began at 4:50 PM. I make my way to the university and stand outside of the classroom door at 4:50 PM, as promised. Through the small square window on the classroom’s door, I notice that the professor is still speaking to his students, potentially giving a preface to my classroom visit. On the blackboard, I see that “Kimberly” has been written in chalk. I feel flattered, but nervous. Eventually, the professor allows me to enter the classroom. I greet the students, and he prefaces my self-introduction by mentioning that I had visited the same university in the past for a presentation. I thank the professor for his kindness and begin to remove my laptop and my dongle from my bag.

The professor had mentioned that he had instructed each of his eighteen students to bring a question to ask me. However, before the Q&A session, I wanted to play an icebreaker game with the students. The professor consented to this, so I spent the hours prior to the session preparing the game. As part of the game, I present twelve logos of SNS that exist in Japan (and worldwide, in the case of the SNS that had originated elsewhere). I instruct students to raise their hand if they know the logos and the SNS that each logo represented. I also tell students to raise their hand if they use the SNS in question. The apps that I selected include LINE, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Pokémon Go, Tinder, Instagram, Meetup, Snow, Pairs, Snapchat, and With.

Virtually all students are acquainted with the logos for LINE, Twitter, Facebook, Pokémon Go, Instagram, Snow, and Snapchat. With regards to actual usage, virtually all students raise their hands for LINE and Instagram. Several students raise their hands for Twitter and Snow (the Snow logo was met with glee). Only three students raise their hands for Facebook. When I inquire as to why so few students used the app despite the classroom’s widespread knowledge of the app, they respond that Facebook was known for taking users’ data—

interestingly, students do not know that Instagram, an app that they all used, is also owned by Facebook. Few students use TikTok. Virtually no students raise their hands for Pokémon Go, although they mention that it used to be popular and that its time had passed. Only two students raise their hands for Meetup, and one student mentions that she has used it for language exchange purposes. Few students raised their hands for Snapchat, although they knew the purpose of the app.

I was shocked by how few students knew and used dating apps (Tinder, Pairs, With). One student is aware of Tinder, although she seems hesitant to raise her hand and demonstrate that she has knowledge of the app. In the classroom discussion, it is revealed that there are multiple stereotypes associated with dating apps. Two students mention that individuals who use dating apps are perceived as *charai* (player). One student discusses the fear associated with dating apps, particularly the danger of meeting an individual whom they do not know personally: would they get *killed* upon meeting that individual? The professor chimes in, asking if these dating apps actually confirm the identity of the individual. I mention that only apps that are not free require individuals to upload a government ID. I confess that technically, yes, the person whom you meet in person may not actually be the individual with whom you were speaking. I say that I have heard from some interviewees that the individual with whom they were speaking were different personality-wise (and a bit appearance-wise) from their online profile. I pose to the class that it is interesting that dating apps in Japan, particularly Tinder, self-advertise as apps designated to make friends and expand one's horizon. We attempt to determine as a group why this is the case, especially since Tinder is largely used in the United States to find romantic or sexual partners: using the app to make "friends" is unheard of and is laughable by my American colleagues. One student then chimes that maybe some users wish to use Tinder in the way that the app is used abroad. Perhaps instead of outright mentioning that they want a partner or want sex, they mention that they wish to visit cafes and find friends.

The questions that the students ask are tricky, though important. These questions demonstrate concern over online privacy and safety, along with general curiosity over the

difference(s) in usage within the United States and Japan: How do you protect yourself in a social media society? Why do Americans show their face online? Why do Americans debate about politics online? Cyberbullying has increased in Japan—is it the same in US? How has bullying changed? Some students also asked about managing passwords and account security. I offer some advice with the caveat that I am an anthropologist, not a data scientist or tech expert. These questions highlighted a point that forms the basis of my lectures to undergraduate students in the United States who are learning about Japan: while Japan is often framed as “different” from a U.S.-centric lens, in many ways, the United States is actually the outlier. The public health situation in the United States is one prominent example.

Several students from the classroom visit volunteer to participate in my research. When interviewing these students in the following weeks, I ask for their reactions to the classroom visit. I note that their colleagues seemed concerned and frightened about the state of SNS and smartphone use in society. One student seems skeptical about her classmates’ paranoia, stating that many of them participate in the very behaviors against which they conveyed concern—for example, use of dating apps. Fast forward to 2021. I am conducting a virtual classroom visit, and students ask me questions about dating apps. Their curiosity is palpable yet cautiously displayed. One student openly expresses that she *wants* to use dating apps. Although I am interacting with the class over Zoom, I can sense the change in atmosphere—it becomes judgmental. The student sticks around at the end of the virtual visit to ask me about my own experiences on dating apps, particularly if I was able to find love. I confess that my previous and current relationships were products of dating apps. A hopeful gleam shimmers in her eyes. The Zoom call ends.

I began to wonder about performativity and the eyes of society. The extensive questions I received about dating apps gestured towards curiosity. It was clear that some students were interested in using these apps, or already were using them. Yet no one wished to openly confess this. It was only during one-on-one interactions that these confessions came to the surface. *Shakaijin* were more upfront about their use of dating apps despite the stigma, even confessing to their own use in group discussions. The difference in openness among university students and

shakaijin is perhaps related to *ba*. Dating apps do not make much sense for university students, who are able to find love via the *ba* of their institution. Perhaps this course of action is viewed as the norm. *Shakaijin*, however, do not have the privilege of such a stable *ba*. Many of the *shakaijin* whom I met during my fieldwork had precarious employment. Yet even for those who had a “workplace,” this setting was not perceived as conducive to romance. In fact, workplace romance was viewed as out of the question. Thus, dating apps, group speed dating events, and introductions from friends constituted the primary networks for finding sex and romance. I was, and still am, intrigued in dating apps as a site of inquiry for intimacy in liquified Japan. But that is a project for another day.

Conclusion

Intimate Solitudes and Solidarities:

Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic

While sitting in the plane en route to Narita for my yearlong fieldwork, I had daydreamed of the ethnographic possibilities of this research. This optimistic daydreaming continued as I moved into my cramped apartment in Tokyo. Never did I imagine that rather than venturing “into the field,” I would be confined to that Tokyo apartment due to a global pandemic for several months. The global outbreak of COVID-19 would prove that “normal” is not promised. It is precarious, in a constant state of flux and (re)negotiation.

Since Twitter had been a prominent SNS of interest throughout my fieldwork, I decided to begin listing Twitter trends into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet on a near daily basis starting in December 2019. On January 25th, 2020, one trending topic on Twitter caught my eye: “third person infected in Japan” (*nihon kokunai san ’ninme no kansensha*). On this date, perhaps I did not think too much about this news. I knew that it was related to the novel coronavirus that had been discovered. I knew that there had been panic about the potential of the virus spreading globally. Ironically, despite my efforts to track Twitter trends in an attempt to remember what I was experiencing and thinking at the time, I cannot remember what I felt upon seeing that trend. Did I feel concerned? Panicked? Writing this conclusion in 2022, I do understand that I had been tracking what would later become a devastating global pandemic. And as my daily recordings and subsequent fieldwork would demonstrate, that same virus would also permeate the digital: a digital contagion of sorts.

I can only feel a sense of sympathy and fatigued sorrow for my past ethnographer-self. Tokyo would later be subjected to a state of emergency, and the summer Olympics would eventually be postponed. As the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global health crisis, my fieldwork transitioned from a mixture of in-person interviews and participant observation both online and offline to purely remote and digital methodologies. The shift to remote and digital

methodologies had also become necessary in the wake of restrictions on in-person fieldwork that had been put into place by Princeton's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I remained connected with interlocutors throughout the pandemic, both in the form of follow-up conversations related to my research and personal "check ins."

Many of my interlocutors had previously narrated the digital as a "supplementary" form of sociality—one that should never replace or surpass in-person sociality. Digital anthropologists are trained to be wary of hierarchical discourse that pits online versus offline, along with the very dichotomous notion of online and offline, virtual and "real." Yet this does not mean that we should automatically discount such discourse and dichotomies when they appear in conversation. In the case of my fieldwork, it was rather interesting to notice these perceptions of the digital in preliminary interviews, and slowly watch them change over the course of the pandemic.

In this conclusion, I would like to center the themes of renegotiation and reflection. The chapters of this dissertation have been tethered by these themes in some form. Interlocutors contemplated the roles that digital technologies played in their everyday rhythms, in difficult moments of transition, and even during moments of global unrest. The outbreak of COVID-19, which rendered in-person sociality difficult or altogether impossible, would highlight the questions that I posed throughout my fieldwork. The digital became *the primary* mode of sociality. The digital would serve as a means of coping with a traumatic global event, as a way of fostering solidarity during the solitude of the times, as a mode of being together while apart. But there were pitfalls. The digital would not only serve as a reminder of what was "lost" in terms of sociality and physical touch, but it would also transform into a source of harm and surveillance. The pandemic would motivate a redrawing of boundaries associated with the digital, and even the boundaries of ethnographic research.

The Shift: Renegotiations of Digital Embeddedness

Beginning in late March, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare began to circulate a survey among LINE users aimed at preventing the onset of clusters. The survey questions inquire

about the respondent's health, particularly if they have experienced any symptoms of COVID, and also inquire if the respondent is taking any active measures against COVID infection or spread (Figure 5.1). The data are then collected and analyzed by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, which then provides public press releases outlining the survey statistics.¹⁰⁵ The decision to utilize LINE is likely due to the platform's massive user base, as it is considered the core messaging platform in Japan. However, some adult interlocutors postulated that this decision was perhaps because of youths' extensive use of the platform. Such ruminations by adult interlocutors gestured towards the blame that was being placed on young people by multiple actors in society—young people were portrayed as primary spreaders of the virus due to their social revelries.



Figure 5.1: Screenshot of the first survey distributed by LINE and the MHLW, as received on my own personal LINE account. The survey question listed above asks the user to indicate their current physical condition. The options are, from top to bottom: the same as usual, a fever above 37.5 degrees Celsius, sore throat or extreme fatigue, cough, other bad conditions not listed above.

¹⁰⁵ An example of one such press release can be accessed via the following link: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_10695.html.

Government officials and entities utilized SNS as a means of spreading and gathering information related to the pandemic. One notable example is Governor Koike Yuriko's interviews and Q&A sessions with popular YouTubers. In April, Governor Koike appeared on YouTuber Hikakin's channel to answer questions and address concerns related to the spread of COVID-19.¹⁰⁶ In August, she also met with YouTuber Fuwa-chan to discuss the "new normal" brought about by the pandemic.¹⁰⁷ We can interpret these collaborations as the government's way of appealing to the public and perhaps youth in particular, given the huge popularity of the platform among youths. These efforts can be hit-or-miss. We see this especially in the case study of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's participation in the *Uchi de odorō* ("Let's Dance at Home") trend that had been circulating on TikTok. Set alongside a video of musician Hoshino Gen singing the tune of the same name, the video depicted Abe relaxing in various parts of his household. This video received much pushback: not only did the video highlight Abe's wealth and privilege during a time of financial precarity for many, but the "relaxing" nature of the video seemed paradoxical for the nation's top official who was also facing much criticism for his perceived ineffective measures against the virus. The early stages of the pandemic also yielded online parodies of government officials, embodied by TikTok dances to a remix of Governor Koike's explanation of avoiding the "Three C's" (*mittsu no mitsu*) of closed spaces, crowded places, and close contact. A Twitter user would eventually circulate an online game, "*Mitsu Desu Gēmu*," in which players guide Koike through crowds of people. As the levels proceed, the player can gain extra points by collecting items that were scarce during the pandemic, such as toilet paper. The player can gain extra "lives" by receiving a mask from former Prime Minister Abe himself. This depiction of Abe is a humorous jab at the "Abenomask" debacle, in which Abe sent two cloth face masks to each household as a way to combat the pandemic (Dudden

¹⁰⁶ The full video can be accessed via the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofCsslfc-So&ab_channel=HikakinTV.

¹⁰⁷ The full video can be accessed via the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8yl-XCxiK8&ab_channel=%E6%9D%B1%E4%BA%AC%E9%83%BDTokyoMetropolitanGovernment.

2020, 51-52).¹⁰⁸ In the examples of TikTok remixes and user-made games, we see that parody is a symptom of frustration with the government's response—or lack thereof—to the circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Parody also serves as a form of collective, mass-mediated coping with shared trauma.

My conversations with interlocutors during the first waves of the pandemic bore a more somber, dazed, and fatigued air. When asking Ran about the complete digitization of her social activities and schooling, she responded: “It’s so strange (*hen na kanji*).” This response was followed by a long, distant stare. Conversations with interlocutors were reflexive, intimate, and vulnerable. This affect was undoubtedly amplified by my virtual presence in interlocutors’ rooms and homes, and vice versa. The unprecedented nature of the crisis and the longing for a return to the previous “normal” provided an opportunity for reflection.

Prior to the pandemic, many interlocutors had remarked that they viewed SNS as a *tool* that should only *supplement* in-person sociality. The circumstances brought about by COVID-19 certainly challenged this notion, as in-person sociality was no longer an option. When asking participants about their SNS usage during the pandemic, I noticed that the following categories of usage dominated our conversations: killing time, acquiring information, checking in on friends and family, utilizing video hangouts as the closest approximation to “face-to-face” sociality, and navigating remote work and study.

The category of killing time (*himatsubushi*) is perhaps unsurprising given that the pandemic has necessitated prolonged periods of staying at home. Discussions of killing time largely centered on playing games and watching videos. While interlocutors spoke of video streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, others also spoke of using video-centric SNS such as YouTube and TikTok.

Joel: “I haven't had a chance to go to campus, so I've been using SNS after classes or between classes. Because, you know, I can't just sit still and just study all day...I have to refresh my mind, even though some say it's bad to look at your phone all day. When you

¹⁰⁸ As Dudden explains, the term “Abenomask” is a combination of “Abenomics,” a referent to Abe’s fiscal policies, and “mask.”

have to rest, you have to rest...watching TikTok is really refreshing, ‘cause, you know, I love watching pranks and stuff.”

Spending more time on SNS can also be detrimental, especially during the pandemic. Some interviewees spoke about being unable to escape news about the pandemic whenever they used SNS. While this is not always negative, continuous exposure can be harmful to those who are experiencing negative emotions or declining mental health due to the pandemic. Some interviewees admitted to refraining from looking at certain posts since the outbreak of COVID-19, especially *instabae* travel posts.

Mako: “Before, I used to look at photos from overseas, but now we can’t travel abroad, right? So I’ve stopped looking at those kinds of posts.”

More time on SNS in the form of “killing time” can also impact sleep schedules. In response to her son’s prolonged smartphone usage mostly consisting of gaming but also involving SNS such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, Nanao exclaimed during one conversation: “Smartphone virus is scarier than coronavirus!” Her son’s ScreenTime for the previous week showed an average of 30 hours and 32 minutes on YouTube.

During the pandemic, I noticed that discourse on addiction and *hikikomori* began to resurface. While flipped through television channels in late May 2020, I stumbled upon a special interview roundtable broadcasted on NHK bearing the ominous title: “Another effect of coronavirus? Gaming addiction becomes more severe (*Shingata korona mo eikyō ka—shinkokuka suru gēmu izon*).” This roundtable, also featuring specialist Higuchi Susumu as introduced in Chapter 4, discussed the implications of “stay home” ordinances on gaming habits and boundaries of addiction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *hikikomori* discourse was also integrated into the roundtable. One commentator noted that while games are framed as an exacerbating factor in *hikikomori* cases, these games—and the digital on a broader scale—allow *hikikomori* to find community and receive solace from others who share their experiences.

I noticed that the boundary between staying home for preventative measures and withdrawing as a *hikikomori* also became contested. After visiting Hashimoto's bar for the first time in months to order take-out, one of the bar regulars whom I had encountered frequently the course of my fieldwork asked: "Kin-chan! Did you turn into a *hikikomori*?" My initial reaction was one of shame, as I understood the stigma behind *hikikomori*. Technically, I was confining myself to my room for weeks on end. This confining was out of necessity due to government recommendations to quarantine, but it was also due to fear. Even during the decrease in numbers between waves, I still did not leave my apartment except for exercise and trips to grocery stores. I was deeply paranoid and afraid of getting sick, a fear that was amplified as I watched news coverage of the dire situation back in my home of New York City. In a video call with Chinami, I mused about these blurry boundaries. She then shared her opinion: if you are staying home because the pandemic is preventing you from going out, this falls under the category of "Stay Home" as popularized in public health mandates. However, if you are staying home even though you can go out, you may be entering *hikikomori* territory. I wondered about the implications of agency and restriction in Chinami's statement.

SNS constituted an important source of information for those who do not necessarily have access to televisions, radios, or other media. The ability to access information at any time has proven to be a valuable affordance. The informative affordances of SNS were highlighted to a greater extent in conversations with interlocutors during the pandemic, compared to our conversations prior to the pandemic. Along with news sources, friends' own SNS profiles were cited as helpful sources of information.

Ran: "I wake up in the afternoon, so the news shows have already ended...so I always open Twitter, watch the news, and get some information about coronavirus."

Grace: "Since I don't have a TV at home, I see people sharing information about coronavirus and reminders to stay home—for people all over the world. This act [of sharing] helped me stay happier and positive, and also made me feel that I should take it more seriously."

Lulu: “I knew that there was no toilet paper and that I should buy some quickly, because everyone was posting that on their Stories.”

Reliance on SNS for information does have its pitfalls. The overwhelming surplus of information on COVID-19 and the spread of misinformation and rumors, referred to as *dema* and “fake news” by interviewees, has resulted in the coining of terms such as “infodemic.” Indeed, we see that the spread of *dema* on SNS such as Twitter bore consequences such as the hoarding of supplies and frantic followings of supposed “safeguards” against coronavirus, such as drinking hot water.

The spread of misinformation and rumors during disaster is not uncommon. A notable example is the rapid circulation of a Tweet claiming that a lion had escaped from the Kumamoto Zoo shortly after the Kumamoto Earthquakes of April 2016. The user who spread this false rumor would eventually be arrested. The nature of COVID-19—a deadly, highly contagious virus that we cannot see—has triggered unique anxieties that have resulted in a continuous seeking and spreading of information. Interlocutors sometimes likened COVID-19 to anxieties of radioactivity following the Triple Disaster of March 11th, 2011. The anxious desire for clarity can trigger both the unintentional and intentional spread of information that is unreliable or completely false. The characterization of the heightened spread of false information as another “virus” or “epidemic” harkens to the long-standing attribution of “viral” discourse to digital technologies (Parikka 2016; Coates 2017). Several platforms began to take measures to ensure that users were receiving information from credible sources regarding COVID-19. Along with fact-checking measures, Twitter has issued a prompt that urges users to get information from credible entities whenever users search for terms related to COVID-19. In the case of Japan, users are given a link to the coronavirus information page provided by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. Similarly, we see that TikTok has partnered with entities such as the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, the World Health Organization, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to provide up-to-date and reliable information on the pandemic and remove any harmful misinformation that is circulating among users.

During the pandemic, LINE released an online guide, “*Uchi de sugosō!* (Let’s spend time at home!),” that introduced users to features that may aid them in spending their time at home in both a “fun” and “comfortable” manner.¹⁰⁹ Examples of advertised features include ordering delivery or takeout from local restaurants and setting up online drinking parties (*online nomikai*) with friends. Interlocutors mentioned that SNS have been helpful avenues for ensuring that their friends and family are safe and in good health. SNS was also narrated as the only means of feeling “like a part of society”, due to the inability to engage in activities outdoors or physically meet with others. Instagram Stories in particular were narrated as helpful mechanisms for checking in on friends, as they offer snapshots of daily activities. Direct Messaging on Instagram and LINE were also cited as helpful tools for staying in touch.

Mai: “There was a birthday yesterday...since we can’t celebrate birthdays in person, the number of people who are uploading celebratory messages on Instagram has increased. My friend from high school had a birthday—since I can’t meet her, I uploaded a [birthday] message. She replied to my story and said ‘thank you!’”

Chinami: “There are three friends with whom I exchange LINE messages every day...with family, I send LINE messages like ‘I cooked some food!’ and ‘How are you?’”

Many interlocutors mentioned that prior to the outbreak of COVID, they had not really used video chat functions because they could simply meet their friends face-to-face. Furthermore, audio calls seemed to be a more appealing alternative to the sometimes-embarrassing nature of video chats—being judged for untidy rooms or an unkept appearance was framed as a primary concern. However, many interlocutors found themselves adopting video chats into their daily lives throughout the pandemic in new and creative ways. Video hangouts on LINE and Zoom were narrated by interviewees as the closest to “face-to-face” communication that they could achieve. Examples of video hangouts include online drinking parties, online morning activities (*asakatsu*), and group foreign language practice (*shaberikai*).

¹⁰⁹ The full guide can be accessed via the following link: <https://guide.line.me/ja/covid19/stayhome/>.

Mai: “You can’t see their [friends’] faces on LINE and Insta, and it’s not in real time. But if you’re using Zoom, you can see their faces, there’s sound, and it’s in real time...of all the SNS, it’s the closest sense of actually meeting [friends].”

Grace: “Instagram stories and posts are ok to see what that person is doing...but I can’t tell real feelings from it. But with video calls, I feel more like I’m meeting that person at that moment face-to-face...technically I’m able to see the person’s face and emotional expressions, so for me it’s more fun and feels real!”

In March and April 2020, Instagram Japan released two stamps designed to be added to users’ Instagram “Stories”: *kyō no kansha* (literally translated as “Today’s Gratitude”, though written as “Thank You Hour” in English-language Instagram) and *ouchi jikan* (literally translated as “Home Time”, though written as “Stay Home” in English-language Instagram). According to the press release issued by Facebook, which owns Instagram, users may add the fluorescent pink *kyō no kansha* stamp to their Instagram Stories whenever they wish to demonstrate gratitude throughout the pandemic—whether that gratitude is directed towards essential workers, or the small joys experienced throughout these difficult times. Each day at 7 PM for one hour, users were able to view a collective *kyō no kansha* Story on their Instagram homepage that featured photos and videos bearing the *kyō no kansha* stamp, similar to a slideshow (Instagram 2020)

Ouchi jikan was designed to allow users to share how they have been spending their time at home throughout the pandemic. Users may add this fluorescent indigo and pink stamp when sharing their favorite recipes, interior design ideas, or simple images of “hanging out” at home (*jitaku de nonbiri shite iru yōsu*). Similar to *kyō no kansha*, users were able view a collective *ouchi jikan* Story on their Instagram homepage (Instagram 2020a).

It is interesting to note that the *ouchi jikan* stamp is stylized as “Stay Home” in Instagram USA. Stay Home brings an authoritative air, a demand. *Ouchi jikan* bears a soft encouraging air, a nudge to stay home during the pandemic—while simultaneously highlighting wellbeing and comfort. Both *kyō no kansha* and *ouchi jikan* may be viewed as a means of checking in with others and standing in solidarity with others during the pandemic. However, *ouchi jikan* in particular may be interpreted as an accountability tool or even a form of social

management. Throughout the pandemic, issues of cyberbullying, online slander (*hibōchūshō*), and “flaming” (*enjō*) re-entered societal discourse. Of course, these issues existed before the outbreak of COVID-19. *Enjō* related to COVID-19 has proliferated, and such instances tend to be directed towards individuals who upload photos or videos that seem to go against measures of quarantining and social distancing. The nicknames *jishuku porisu* and *jishuku keisatsu*, or “self-restraint police”, have circulated in reference to individuals—both offline and online—who have been taking active measures to criticize or condemn those who seem to be going out during COVID-19. Interlocutors such as Chinami mentioned that they have refrained from uploading any photos or videos on their Instagram Story that reveal that they have been going outdoors, in fear of being judged or criticized by their friends or other followers:

Chinami: “I definitely do not upload posts about me going out. It’s fine because I’m not really going out. But for example, I can’t post things like ‘My hometown is nice’ because people will say ‘You’ve gone home!’ So I don’t post things like ‘I went back to my hometown’ or ‘I met with my family for the first time in a while’.”

The phatic communication of platforms such as Instagram ultimately become a source of surveillance and policing. Here, we see the eyes of society at work yet again.

Nearly all interlocutors spoke of the recent digitization of their work and study lives. At times, this involved a leakage into their SNS usage: for example, some interviewees remarked that they were now using LINE to communicate with their employer, colleagues, teachers, and classmates. Students largely spoke of Zoom as the primary platform for remote learning, although some mentioned that several professors had been using platforms such as YouTube to upload class videos. Digitally mediated sociality can leave much to be desired. Indeed, some interviewees lamented that speaking to friends via SNS is enough for now given the circumstances, but they miss in-person interactions. Several interlocutors also spoke about the difficulties of navigating the flow of conversations, being unable to read faces, and being unable to discern when it is permissible to leave a video chat. Anne, a university student, mentioned that speaking to her acquaintances over Zoom only amplified her longing to see them in-person.

Some interlocutors cited a desire to share the same space (*kūkan*) as their friends, to be able to touch and hold them. During one conversation, Chinami hugged a nearby stuffed animal to demonstrate that showing physical affection to her friends is a key part of *nomikai* for her, and this cannot be satisfied in its online iteration.

Chinami: “I’ve been invited to do online *nomikai* several times. But, it’s not that fun. I think it’s fun to be able to lean on your friend while you’re drinking...I don’t think there’s much of a point in drinking alone. It’s more fun to meet in person.”

Those who were enrolled in online classes lamented the loss of the physical space of the classroom. Many complained of technological issues and disruptions with online classes, the steep learning curve for online instruction and the use of online platforms (both for professors and students alike), and the unmanageable increase in assignments. Mai lamented being unable to physically lean over and ask her fellow classmates for help during class sessions—with online classes, there are less opportunities for conversations and intimate proximity. Furthermore, Mai mentioned that it has become difficult to discern if the label “friend” can apply to her new classmates, as she had never met them in-person. First-year students struggled, as they were excited to make new friends and experience their transition to university life. It is already difficult to complete transitions in life stage — the digital made it even more so.

Atarimae, Taken-for-Grantedness, and (Re)Situating “Normal”

In my conversations with interlocutors prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, we contemplated the centrality of SNS and smartphones in everyday life and sociality in contemporary Japan. Conversations with interlocutors centered on hypothetical examinations of how one’s social life would change without these technologies. However, the outbreak of the pandemic led to a reversal of these contemplations, ultimately motivating my project to question the implications of a social life *only* facilitated by digital means, a reality in which digital sociality becomes *the* form of sociality rather than a mere “supplement” to in-person sociality.

Digital sociality becomes the new *atarimae* (the way things are); it does not merely exist in the “foreground” or “background” (Ito 2005, 15). The digital becomes highly engrained, atmospheric, and ambient (Madianou 2016). As conversations with youth interlocutors demonstrate, the centrality of the digital in the wake of the pandemic bears its merits and pitfalls, gains and losses. One can argue that the fabric of SNS as a whole has also been impacted. Abidin suggests that the pandemic has marked a transition from “networked publics” to “refracted publics” (Abidin 2021).

The construction of narratives of *atarimae* as these narratives relate to the embeddedness of SNS and smartphones is reminiscent of the dynamics discussed within Richard Ling’s influential work, *Taken for Grantedness: The Embedding of Mobile Communication into Society*. Ling explicates how mobile communication and the use of mobile phones becomes socially ingrained—in other words, how the mobile phone has “become a part of the social fabric,” how it “has become woven into our expectations of one another,” how it has become “taken for granted” (xi). Ling juxtaposes the mobile phone with other technologies that have become “taken for granted,” including mechanical clocks, cars, and the internet. Ling focuses on the mobile phone as a “social mediation technology,” a medium that “facilitates our social dealings” or “intervenes between actors” (9). He defines social mediation technologies, as he states:

Social mediation technologies are legitimated artifacts and systems governed by group-based reciprocal expectations that enable, but also set conditions for, the maintenance of our social sphere. The use of social mediation technologies is not simply a matter of personal choice; it is in general an assumed part of social interaction. We use these technologies to orient and organize ourselves for instrumental as well as expressive purposes. We use them in our roles as family member, friend, and colleague. They are a part of the baggage associated with group interaction, and as such they can form, mold, constrain, facilitate, and set the conditions for sociation. (7-8, emphasis in original)

Drawing upon Durkheim, Ling also suggests that the embeddedness of technologies such as the mobile phone constitutes a social fact (Ling 2012, 20-21; Durkheim 1938). At the time of writing, Ling warns that the mobile phone may evolve drastically following the publication of

his work. He addresses the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, and how status updates may be incorporated into the locus of interpersonal interactions (Ling 2012, 11-12).

Despite the evolution of mobile phones since the publication of Ling's work in 2012, the dynamics described by Ling are very much present in the social mediation afforded by smartphones and SNS today. Furthermore, Ling's discussion of the "taken-for-grantedness" of technologies such as the mobile phone is highly pertinent to contemporary narrations of *atarimae*. Ling describes the turning point of taken-for-grantedness, as he states:

At some point in the adoption and diffusion process we stop being surprised at others' use of a technology. Somewhat later we might start to assume it of one another. In a sense, this progression means that the technology is becoming a tacit part of society. At some point there is the reciprocal assumption that others are also users. We take it for granted. When diffusion has reached this level, the social mediation system enables but also constrains interaction. It gives us the freedom to interact with other users, but it also demands that we are users. (33)

What is taken for granted in the context of SNS and smartphone usage in contemporary Japan, especially in the wake of the pandemic? Is it the physical intimacy and sociality that takes place during "in-person" encounters? Is it the perceived ontology of SNS and smartphones as "tools" that only facilitate sociality yet cannot, and should not, constitute a stand-alone source of sociality? As the mixed reactions of youth interlocutors demonstrate, the answer is that *both* are taken for granted. The pandemic highlighted the necessity of SNS and smartphones in facilitating sociality—in other words, these technologies should not be underestimated as mere "supplements" to in-person sociality. However, the pandemic also highlighted that in-person sociality cultivates an intimacy that cannot be replicated by the digital.

In thinking of the tensions between digital and supposed "in-person" sociality, I recall a comment made by Ichika: "Why have *ofukai* (offline meetings) in the first place?" Ichika was referring to offline meetings that take place among members of online communities after speaking for a certain period of time. This is not to say that the digital is inferior. Quite the contrary, the pandemic has revealed the possibilities and indispensability of the digital. By

highlighting youths' mixed feelings regarding the complete digitization of their lives, I aim to facilitate critical examination of perceived norms and unspoken yet implied "boundaries" as they relate to digital sociality. The tension between the longing for physical or proximate sociality and the largely understood value of the digital in facilitating sociality poses a conundrum for digital anthropologists. A major project of digital anthropology has been to problematize dialectics of digital and physical, real and unreal—to assert that the online or virtual is just as "real" for many as "offline" interactions (Boellstorff 2008; 2016). Digital anthropologists will have to continue to wrestle with this tension, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

It is important to note that discourse on moral spheres with regards to digital sociality often takes place in the context of societal anxieties and "moral panics." For example, interlocutors often spoke of the boundaries of "healthy" and "unhealthy" SNS and smartphone usage in the context of "addiction" and *hikikomori*. The pathologization of SNS and smartphone usage and associated anxieties are also addressed by Ling, who suggests that an understanding of the process of embeddedness can allow individuals to discern if the (over)use of a social mediation technology is "pathology or just a healthy need for social interaction" (Ling 2012, 3-4).

Youth narratives demonstrate that SNS and smartphone usage is nuanced and thought through with great reflexivity and awareness. This counteracts moral panic discourse on youth as mindlessly falling victim to these technologies, curmudgeon explanations of "those youths with their pesky smartphones!" When offering interviewees to share any messages that they wish to convey to the readers of my dissertation about SNS and smartphone usage, most interviewees stressed the importance of using smartphones and SNS "correctly." This was mostly narrated in the context of cyberbullying on SNS. Youth interlocutors ultimately understand that SNS and smartphones are not entirely forces of good or evil. When used "correctly," SNS and smartphones make our lives easier and facilitate friendships. When "misused" or "abused," these technologies can cause great harm.

COVID-19 will have long-lasting effects on Japanese society. We already see that variants of the phrase “new normal” (*atarashī atarimae*, *atarashī nichijyō*, *atarashī seikatsu yōshiki*, *nyū nōmaru*) have been circulating online, on television, and even within train stations (Figure 5.2). Entities such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) have already begun to discuss the groundwork for policies that are necessary for life “With Corona.” In its 2020 White Paper, MIC proposes that a “With Corona” society would synchronize “cyberspace” and “real space” with the aim of protecting human life and creating “new values” (MIC 2020, 2). 5G technology is portrayed as one of the major potential facilitators of this synchronization (3-5). We already see calls by multiple societal actors, including government entities and firms, for advancements in digitization. Such initiatives include implementing digital *hanko* (official seals) to allow telework to operate more smoothly. In the wake of these announcements of the dawn of a “new normal,” we must remain cognizant that “normal” can be exclusionary. The perception of smartphones and SNS usage as *atarimae*, for example, brings about questions of accessibility and socioeconomic class. Future studies centering on embeddedness—whether this is the embeddedness of technologies, objects, or practices—must contemplate and (re)situate the meaning of *atarimae*. “Normal” is constantly in flux, and “normal” is not “normal” for everyone. Scholars must critically examine exactly *who* is crafting these “norms”, the *context* in which these “norms” are cultivated and even enforced, and the *reception* of these “norms” by their practitioners.



Figure 5.2: Photograph of a “new normal”—or more specifically “new everyday”—sign in a subway station in Tokyo.

Digital Intimacies

Notions of taken-for-grantedness and “new normals” also apply to ethnography. What new possibilities and obstacles arise for the ethnographer in pandemic times? I arrived in Japan prepared to utilize a mixture of in-person and digital interactions with interlocutors as part of my methodology. However, the onset of COVID-19 marked in-person interactions as out of the question. The outbreak of the pandemic marked a moral necessity to protect the health of my interlocutors, along with my own health. Thus, my fieldwork became completely digital and remote. One of the conclusions I had reached prior to the pandemic was that to understand an interlocutor’s SNS usage, the ethnographer should attempt to understand their life offline. Furthermore, up until the pandemic, all of my interviews had been in person. There was thus a learning curve in conducting interviews online. It is more difficult to read body language and

“read the room” when you are looking at your interlocutor through a screen. However, while the computer screen added a degree of separation, the intimacy was still there.

I was surprised upon realizing that my closeness with interlocutors had been intensified by the digital. I felt closer to interlocutors while communicating with them throughout the pandemic, even if they had only recently been recruited to participate in my study. The experience of being “together” in quarantine constituted an ice breaker—we were both navigating the video encounter together in an unprecedented crisis. In other words, the major facilitator of this rapid intimacy was the set of circumstances surrounding the pandemic. Suddenly, we were at home. There was nowhere for us to go. We had lost track of time, and we were alone with our thoughts: we needed someone to talk to. I felt the pain of my interlocutors, and they inquired about my own “quarantine experience.” The “ethnographic encounter” began to feel more like conversations between close friends, and involved more creative and exciting interactions. Upon asking her about any new hobbies she has taken up during the pandemic, Chinami pulled out her ukulele and began to play me a song by Aimyon, one of her favorite artists. I began to schedule weekly dress-up and catch-up sessions with Grace. I also found myself doing online yoga together with Akiko.

The digital poses opportunities for new forms of intimacy and sociality, ones that are “always on.” However, while exciting, the digital raises new challenges regarding boundaries, particularly as they relate to ethnographic research. Video check-ins straddle complex territory, as they feel very casual and amicable in nature yet are still related to research. Yet another new boundary is crossed during video interviews: I can see into my interlocutors’ rooms and homes, and they can see into mine. I had to be mindful in cases of interviewees who were not living alone, as some topics of conversation were deemed “risky” to speak about out loud.¹¹⁰ I learned about this caveat firsthand during a virtual check-in with Riko in late May.

¹¹⁰ The ethical guidelines offered by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) are helpful in navigating these dynamics: <https://aoir.org/ethics/>.

Riko provided some updates about the changes that had taken place in her life since the outbreak. She complained of online classes, comparing it to *taimen* (in-person) classes—she longed for those moments in which she could lean over to a classmate and ask questions about the lesson. I eventually asked Riko if I could ask some follow-up questions from a past conversation. Riko gave a thumbs-up, followed by enthusiastically saying: “Okay!” I smiled and clicked through the files on my computer. “So I’m looking through the notes...first off, how is your sister doing?” I asked. “She’s right here!” Riko said out loud. I froze, not knowing that Riko’s sister had been there the entire time! This was an uncanny experience that pitted the familiar and the unknown, presence and absence. Riko did not have headphones on throughout the conversation. I realized that it had been presumptuous of me to think that she was alone. “Oh! So she can hear me?” I asked. Riko looked to a corner of the room outside of the camera’s field of vision. “She’s doing something else, but if I call her she’ll come over.” I hesitated. “Ah, I’m nervous all of a sudden...” I mentioned. “Should I call her over?” Riko asked.

Although I was intrigued about meeting Riko’s sister since she was a prominent figure in Riko’s discussions of SNS as one’s own private world, I found myself intimidated at the spontaneity of meeting her. Furthermore, I was not sure if her sister would be comfortable with speaking to me on such short notice. I told Riko that I was interested in hearing her sister’s opinions on social media, and if perhaps I could send some questions over text. I explained some of these questions briefly. “Hold on a second...” Riko said, as she picked up a pen and paper. “Let me ask her!” Riko then muted her microphone and walked away. I waited, spending the next minute or two looking at my own image on the screen. Riko eventually returned and mentioned that her sister is fine with answering questions over text, so long as I de-identify her.

After asking about Riko’s own digital habits during the pandemic, I transitioned to the last question that I had wanted to ask. “So, one more question, and I think this will be the last one...it’s about your mom,” I began. “*Chotto matte, chotto matte!* Wait a second, wait a second!” Riko suddenly exclaimed, while frantically unwrapping a pair of headphones nearby and plugging them into her iPad. I realized that I had committed an ethnographic blunder. I had

planned to ask if her mother, who was adamant on being “analog,” eventually ended up buying a smartphone. I viewed this as an innocuous question. However, Riko did not know that this would be the question—perhaps she was concerned that I would ask an invasive question. Or, she was concerned that I was asking about her mother at all, as this would not be taken well by her family. It seemed that it was permissible to ask about her sister without any concern over her sister hearing; however, discussion of her mother was off-limits without headphones. Once Riko had her headphones on, she smiled and said: “Ok, ask away!” I apologized profusely for asking about her mother out loud. “It’s okay! I was just thinking that I don’t want anyone to hear.” She responded. I apologized again before asking: “I was just curious — did your mom ever end up getting a smartphone?” Riko smirked, leaned into the camera, and whispered: “*Kaimashita!* She bought it!” We then began to laugh in unison.

The ethnographic encounter of the video call fosters the development of an intersubjective third, a co-constituted space in which both the anthropologist and the interlocutor are present and reflect upon the unconscious dynamics and projections of their relationship (Ogden 1994; Borneman 2009; Borneman 2011; Balick 2014). Balick’s (2012) examination of “virtual impingement” constitutes one case study of the presence of transference and the intersubjective third in the digital sphere. Balick (2012) defines virtual impingement as “any event that happens in relation to a person by way of the virtual world, which is experienced as an intrusion on the self” (125). He presents the clinical case study of “Thomas,” a client who becomes distressed after performing a Google search of Balick. While conducting this search in his home, Thomas discovered an article centering on Balick’s discovery of a rare and highly venomous centipede in his own apartment. Thomas became enraged that he had not known of this, yet thousands of individuals had learned about it. Balick explains:

Though Thomas was alone, this was exactly the moment when the virtual impingement occurred *in relation to the two of us* – but not within the safety of the consultation room in the presence of our cocreated ‘third’, a place where the feelings and fantasies that are provoked can be reality tested. Instead, this experience occurred outside the confines of the consulting room, at night, during a state of anxiety... Thomas, who had shared so

much with me, had to find out this global story from a Google search; it was as if I had let thousands of others in, but kept him out...It was an impingement so severe that he experienced it as an offense, an abandonment, a rupture. (128; emphasis in original)

Balick argues that there is no space for the intersubjective third in Google (130). I do, however, believe that the intersubjective third is present in other digital encounters, such as the Zoom Room. While the presence of the intersubjective third online may not be as strong as its presence within physical encounters, it is still there nonetheless. Much like in-person encounters, video calls became a space where interlocutors asked me about my personal life, shared their life updates, and even asked for my advice on personal dilemmas, which often involved romantic interests. But there was an added layer of transference happening here, one facilitated by the vulnerability of shared trauma. I also found myself confiding in my interlocutors and seeking their support and company as I struggled with navigating the pandemic alone in Tokyo. At times, we even stayed on video calls in silence, performing tasks around the house—ambient co-presence, so to speak (Madianou 2016).

I do not wish to paint the global pandemic in a light of toxic positivity. It is a deadly virus and has had devastating effects. I do not wish to romanticize the awful conditions brought about the pandemic or the impossibility of in-person contact with others. In turning the pages of my fieldnotes, I could not help but recall the controversy of Malinowski's diary, as recounted in my anthropology seminars. Malinowski spoke candidly of his disdain for being in the field, which included sheer boredom. My fieldnotes during the pandemic were depressed musings of being able to do absolutely nothing, of being trapped in an apartment so cramped that I could reach the front door from my bed in only a few giant steps. The only glimmers of hope within my fieldnotes were my digital interactions with interlocutors.

The digital would serve as a saving mediating grace during my return from the field. After informing the Wada Family that I would return to the United States in August 2020, Maria and Keisuke offered to help me with my bearings and bring me to the airport. As I sat with Maria in the living room the evening before my flight, she expressed concern that I would not return to

Japan. She knew of the difficult experiences that I had with regards to discrimination, beyond the episode in the Tokyo restaurant in Chapter Three. She was also unsure when—or if—I would be able to return due to the pandemic. I reassured her that I would certainly return. Little did I know, a travel ban would be set in place that would prevent me from returning. I have not returned since. My “returns” to the field would constitute multiple video calls with interlocutors and continued perusal of Japanese SNS. The Wada Family would include me in a LINE family group chat. When landing in New York, I opened the LINE chat to see that Maria had sent a photograph of two stuffed animals—one belonging to the family and another that I had given to the family due to my overweight luggage—poised near the veranda window. The photo was accompanied by a caption, written in a childish style to embody the stuffed animals’ imagined voices: “Kin-*chan* is on a plane right around now!” During video calls with the Wada Family, Maria would hold my stuffed animal to the camera as we exchanged updates. Akiko, the member of the Leonardo DiCaprio fan club, would video call me during her gatherings with the fan club. “We miss you, come back soon!” Each member commented while waving to the camera.

The digital has allowed me to maintain connections with my interlocutors even while sitting in my living room in Princeton, New Jersey. However, there are shortcomings that deserve transparency. My physical presence in Japan allowed me to keep on the pulse of current events in the country with relative ease, ultimately fostering conversation between myself and my interlocutors. Furthermore, I was able to video chat and message my interlocutors without worrying about a time difference. Although the digital has bridged the distance, so to speak, the gap is still felt. The gap is especially palpable as I view interlocutors’ life milestones on SNS, such as the graduations of Hajime, Hitomi, and Himawari. I am glad that I can witness these moments, but there is much to be desired in terms of sharing experiences—similar to Chinami’s discussions of online *nomikai*, in a way. There is also the inevitable “drifting away” that can take place, even when connected digitally. Life often gets in the way, and sometimes it takes weeks to hear from interlocutors. I, too, sometimes take a while to respond due to personal circumstances. The digital is useful for facilitating ongoing conversations that are helpful for my research.

Scholars such as Waltrip have described the shifting nature of the “analysis” stage of fieldwork, noting that smartphones and SNS allow anthropologists to engage in continuous dialogue with interlocutors and ultimately receive updates on developments “from the intimate micro to the macros” (Waltrip 2021, 147). However, this constant connection or being “always on” also creates an insurmountable level of fatigue and an overwhelming mountain of data, which inevitably prolonged the writing process.

The digital entered into the radar of some scholars only *after* the wake of the pandemic—in this context, the digital is sometimes framed as an inferior but inevitable replacement due to border closures and quarantine measures. The digital merits more rigorous appreciation and engagement. It will be necessary for every anthropologist to undertake formal or informal study of digital ethnographic methods. The last decade has seen a fortunate growth in reflections and edited volumes on the promises of digital ethnography, virtual ethnography, remote ethnography, and hashtag ethnography as valid and powerful methods (Boellstorff 2012; Horst and Miller 2012a; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Hjorth et. al 2017). As Postill explains, remote ethnography provides an opportunity to reflect and reconstruct notions of “Being There” (Geertz 1988; Postill 2017). There are also myriad possibilities for visualizing and representing ethnographic data. For example, Karen Nakamura (2017) has demonstrated that websites and documentary film can serve as visual companions to manuscripts. Karen Waltrip (2021) has also discussed the possibility of collage as a form of “multimodal sorting.” The continued attention granted to data visualization in anthropology—evident by Princeton’s own VizE Lab—also demonstrates the promises of the digital. As I continue to develop this research, I plan to experiment with these possibilities. In thinking of the promises of digital ethnography, it is crucial to also understand that this methodology is not seamless. Digital anthropologists should make an effort to demonstrate transparency on the difficulties of digital ethnography with regards to factors such as ethics, positionality, “failure” and even fatigue (Abidin and de Seta 2020). In the introduction to their edited volume, Horst and Miller (2012b) assert: “The digital should and can be a highly effective means for reflecting upon what it means to be human, the ultimate task of anthropology

as a discipline” (3). I propose that this also relates to the human-ness of the digital anthropologist in navigating new and strange “normals.”

Digital Futures

As an exercise in reflection, I sometimes asked interlocutors how or if their lives would change if they did not own a smartphone or use SNS. Nearly all interlocutors agreed that their lives would change, though not necessarily in a catastrophic manner. Interlocutors mentioned that while it would be difficult to acquire information, communicate with acquaintances and family members, maintain social relationships, and seek entertainment or “kill time,” an “analog” life *does* have its merits. Interlocutors cited the possibility of using time more efficiently, spending more time outdoors, and spending less money on products found online. Others confessed that they would simply switch to different media, such as televisions and personal computers.

The digital serves as an insightful lens into change and continuity in society. While centering on Japan, this dissertation has aimed to highlight themes and reflections that are relevant to any society that is navigating heightened digital embeddedness. The continued evolution of the digital will undoubtedly instigate new fears and dangers. But there are also myriad possibilities. The global COVID-19 pandemic motivated—against our will—a consideration of the digital as a growing necessity in mediating sociality. One can perhaps say that the pandemic has highlighted the impossibility of staying “analog,” which bears implications regarding socioeconomic class and accessibility to perceived “ubiquitous” technologies.

This dissertation has centered intergenerational reflections and anxieties regarding smartphone ownership and SNS usage in Japan. Adults are concerned, and rightfully so, but young people are more aware than adults and other societal actors think. Youth interlocutors’ use of smartphones and SNS as mediators in sociality is accompanied by great reflexivity on what these devices can and cannot do—along with what these devices *should and should not do*. The origins of this reflexivity can be attributed to personal experience, parenting styles, educational

initiatives, media representations of risk and harm, and “nudging” interventions made by platforms and public health entities. Public discourse on danger, risk, and harm related to digital devices should accordingly focus on addressing the negative consequences of usage, rather than only naming these consequences. This applies not just to Japan, but other national and societal contexts.

Although the digital is framed as an embodiment of futurity, it can teach us as much about the “old” as it does the “new.” Within this dissertation, we have seen various forms of change. The amplified affordances of the smartphone camera and the filtering affordances of Instagram constitute changes in the documentation of experience. *Instabae* culture serves as a new way carving spaces for sociality among girls and young women. Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are used to enact change via activist storytelling. The growing embeddedness of the digital both prior to and during pandemic times has motivated changes in attitudes about the very notion of sociality itself—particularly the perceived superiority of “in-person” sociality. This also includes shifting attitudes and approaches towards wellbeing. Within the changes, we also see continuity. There is the ongoing use of the camera in processes of memory making and phatic communion. There is the continued solidification of gendered social spheres, along with the coopting of gendered play and consumerism by capitalist entities. There is the persistence of norms and myths regarding gender and national identity. With regards to public health, we see the continued use and effectiveness of “nudges.” Finally, we see the continuation of relational understandings of the self, intimacy, and connection.

The digital is an ever-evolving medium that will constantly be in flux. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, the platforms that I have highlighted may very well decrease in popularity in the coming years. Since the digital is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore as a driving force in sociality and societal dynamics, anthropologists must address it in some way. And since it is ever-evolving, ethnography also needs to adapt to these changes—as do our attitudes and approaches related to the digital. But there is a thread of continuity amidst the change, and that is just as important. My hope is that this dissertation serves as a guide for

“doing” an ethnography of the digital in contemporary Japan, which may be extended to the digital in other contexts.

Appendix

A. Charts of Interlocutors

The following charts outline the interlocutors mentioned in the dissertation, including details such as age, gender, and life stage. As adults were less willing to disclose their age, I do not provide that information in their chart. Instead, I provide notes on their occupations, interests, and other life details.

Youth Interlocutors

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Life Stage
Anne	19	Woman	University student
Audrey	22	Woman	University student
Chinami	25	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Elsa	19	Girl	University student
Grace	26	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (unemployed)
Hajime	16	Boy	High school student
Haribo	24	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Himawari	17	Girl	High school student
Hitomi	17	Girl	High school student
Ichika	25	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Joel	18	Boy	University student
Lulu	25	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Mai	18	Girl	University student
Mako	19	Girl	University student
Manatsu	24	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Nagi	19	Boy	University student
Natsuki	26	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Ran	18	Girl	University student
Riko	18	Girl	University student
Takenori	19	Boy	University student
Urara	25	Woman	<i>Shakaijin</i> (employed)
Yasushi	22	Man	Graduate student
Yoshi	20	Man	University student

Adult Interlocutors

Pseudonym	Gender	Notes
Akiko	Woman	Member of a Leonardo DiCaprio fan club active on SNS
Hashimoto	Man	Owner of a British-style pub
Keisuke	Man	Salaryman at an IT company, father of the Wada household
Maria	Woman	<i>Keiyakushain</i> (contract worker), mother of the Wada household Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), preparing to backpack in the Philippines
Masami	Woman	Classroom helper, mother of the Ono household
Nanao	Woman	Office staff at an accounting firm
Sakura	Woman	Secretary, (single) mother of the Hayashi household
Shiori	Woman	Unemployed, became pregnant during my fieldwork
Yuriko	Woman	

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