

Culture | Heavenly hosts

The controversial cult of the host club in Japan

Why women pay men in make-up to flatter them



When being nice pays off PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

May 21st 2024 | TOKYO

Save Share Give

IN KABUKICHO, A red-light district in Tokyo, four young men surround your female correspondent. Hiragi Saren, a 25-year-old with bleached hair, a black tank top and a silver necklace, sits closest. He chatters warmly and glances seductively, his pink eyeshadow glimmering under the chandeliers. His three assistants keep filling your correspondent's *shochu* glass and shower her with compliments about her appearance. She doubts their sincerity, but is strangely pleased. After an hour and a half, the bill is ¥30,000 (\$200).

Host clubs are booming in Japan. Some 21,000 hosts—well-dressed young men, often wearing make-up like K-pop stars—work at 900 such establishments. They pamper and flatter their female clients. Sex is not part of the bargain but could happen, somewhere else. Clients usually seek psychological rather than physical intimacy. Hosts refer to them as *hime* (princess), and never ask how old they are or what they do for a living.

ADVERTISEMENT

To understand the cult of the host, start with two statistics. More than 60% of Japanese women in their late 20s are unmarried, double the rate in the mid-1980s. A recent survey found that more than a third of unmarried adults aged 20-49 had never dated. Many single women visit host clubs because they are lonely. They get a thrill from meeting “the kind of men they don’t meet in everyday life”, Mr Hiragi says.

The first host club opened in the mid-1960s, mostly serving as a dance hall for rich matrons and widows. Early hosts described themselves as “male *geishas*”, says Hojo Yuichi, who runs *Ai Honten*, the oldest active host club. At first, the clubs were seen as a fringe, sleazy business. But that stigma has faded.

Successful hosts are now celebrities. In the 2000s they started appearing on TV shows. Today many have a big social-media following. Billboards and trucks display pictures of the highest earners. Hosts feature as characters in manga and anime, too. They have become “an archetype within Japanese popular culture”, says Thomas Baudinette, an anthropologist at Macquarie University. Mr Hiragi moved to Tokyo from a rural area with dreams of becoming a famous host. “I wanted to be part of a world that’s glamorous,” he says.

Glamorous, yet controversial. Feminist groups accuse host clubs of exploitation: overcharging for drinks and manipulating clients into racking up huge tabs. Hosts praise those who spend the most, calling them “ace”. Some customers end up in debt after paying millions of yen for a single visit. Takahashi Ichika, a client, recalls that her favourite host would ignore her and fiddle with his phone when she refused to order champagne. “I would spend more money because I didn’t want him to dislike me. I wanted his attention,” she says.

ADVERTISEMENT

Some women go to extraordinary lengths to feed their host habit. A survey last year showed that among women arrested for selling sex around Okubo Park, a popular pickup spot, over 40% were trying to earn enough money to go to host clubs. Politicians have started discussing ways to [regulate](#) the industry, for example by cracking down on opaque pricing. Host-club owners hope to pre-empt this with better self-regulation.

Some see a link between the cult of the host and obsessive [fan culture](#). In a survey in 2023, 72% of Japanese women in their 20s said they indulged in *oshikatsu* (avidly supporting a celebrity, for example by buying several copies of each new hit). The objects of their adoration were often pop idols. But some are switching their allegiance to hosts, to whom they can get much closer. Ms Takahashi says she used to spend a lot on [boy bands](#), but when concerts stopped during covid, she started to splurge on hosts instead.

Many other Japanese businesses, such as cuddle cafés, offer intimate services, usually to men. Mr Baudinette worries, though, that for many Japanese people, “intimacy can only be accessed through commoditised forms.”

Yamada Kurumi, a client, works at a brothel to earn enough money to visit the clubs, which she does about once a week. She had boyfriends in the past but finds hosts more exciting. She is unsure whether to seek an office job after graduating from college or to carry on with sex work, which pays better. “A lot of people start losing touch with friends once they get addicted to host clubs,” says Ms Yamada. “My host is already part of my everyday life...If I get a normal job, I probably won’t be able to see him any more. That scares me.” ■

For more on the latest books, films, TV shows, albums and controversies, sign up to [Plot Twist](#), our weekly subscriber-only newsletter

Save

Share

Give

Reuse this content

More from Culture



The hit series “Bridgerton” has set off a string-quartet boom

It is a surprising example of how popular culture can shape consumer habits

What if calling someone stupid was a crime?

Lionel Shriver imagines cancel culture going to even greater extremes



Fury vs Usyk is the biggest fight this century

Boxing’s prioritisation of money over competition is hurting the sport



[Subscribe](#)

[Reuse our content](#)

[Corporate subscriptions](#)

[Help and contact us](#)

Keep updated



Published since September 2019 to take part in “a serious contest between

PUBLISHED SINCE SEPTEMBER 1843 TO TAKE PART IN *a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress.*"

The Economist

[About](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Press centre](#)

The Economist Group

[The Economist Group](#)

[Economist Intelligence](#)

[Economist Impact](#)

[Economist Impact Events](#)

[Working here](#)

[Economist Education Courses](#)

[Executive Jobs](#)

To enhance your experience and ensure our website runs smoothly, we use cookies and similar technologies.

[Manage Cookies](#)

[Terms of Use](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookie Policy](#) [Accessibility](#) [Modern Slavery Statement](#) [Sitemap](#) [Your Data Rights](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2024. All rights reserved.