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Singlehood in ‘precarious Japan’: examining new gender tropes and inter-gender communication in a culture of uncertainty

KUMIKO ENDO 

Abstract: Romantic partnership formation by itself has remained intact in most postindustrial societies despite declining marriage rates. However, among contemporary Japanese people of childbearing age, the never-married singlehood rate is ever-increasing amidst a dearth of alternative forms of partnership, a consistently high demand for marriage, and a thriving ‘marriage hunting’ (*konkatsu*) market. At the core of this puzzle is a prevalence of virginity and significantly decreased inter-gender interaction among the singles as a whole. Based upon qualitative research conducted at multiple ‘marriage hunting’ venues within the Tokyo metropolis, this article analyses contemporary Japanese singlehood within the framework of the ‘culture of uncertainty’, which scholars have argued characterizes post-bubble ‘precarious Japan’. It can be argued that the current absence of past institutions that mediated interpersonal connections has left the recent generation who came of age during the two ‘lost decades’ deprived of relevant gender scripts as well as appropriate gendered expectations. Specifically, this article examines how newly emergent non-normative gender tropes, such as the ‘herbivore-type man’, are regarded with ambivalence by both men and women, as well as how traditional gender norms persist within the singles’ psyche despite their increasing social irrelevance.

Keywords: culture of uncertainty, precarious Japan, singlehood, marriage hunting, *konkatsu*, herbivore, *sōshoku*, inter-gender interaction

Introduction

The Japanese singlehood paradox

The institution of marriage has assumed multiple forms, functions and meanings throughout the course of modern history (Coontz 2005), and is currently in a

Table 1 The proportion of never-married singles by age group (1990 versus 2010)

Sex	Age group	Proportion of singles in 1990 (%)	Proportion of singles in 2010 (%)
Male	25 to 29	65.1	71.8
	30 to 34	32.8	47.3
	35 to 39	19.1	35.6
	40 to 44	11.8	28.6
Female	25 to 29	40.4	60.3
	30 to 34	13.9	34.5
	35 to 39	7.5	23.1
	40 to 44	5.8	17.4

Source: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Government of Tokyo (2011)

state of decline in most advanced post-industrialized societies (Van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe 2010). Regardless, partnership formation has remained intact in the modern social fabric, albeit increasingly embodying new styles, such as non-marital cohabitation (Bumpass *et al.* 1991; Kiernan 2001; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). In contemporary Japanese society, however, there exists the paradox of a surge in the singlehood rate alongside a consistently high demand for marriage among heterosexual singles and a dearth of alternative forms of partnership formation (Matsuda 2005; Atoh 2008; Cabinet Office 2011; Ishida 2013).

Today, nearly 90% of young Japanese singles have the 'intention to marry eventually' (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2012), with many participating in the thriving 'marriage hunting' (*konkatsu*) market (Yamada and Shirakawa 2008), while the proportion of never-married singles among people of childbearing age has increased by roughly 15 to 20% since 1990 (see Table 1). Moreover, unlike singlehood in other post-industrialized countries where young people have increasingly opted for alternative forms of partnership formation (Lesthaeghe 2011), Japanese singlehood entails 'effective singlehood' (Jones 2007) that involves celibacy and a lack of inter-gender interaction in general. For example, in today's Japanese society, over 40% of singles between the ages of 18 and 34 have never had sexual intercourse (see Table 2), and roughly seven out of ten men and three out of five women claim that they do not even have friends of the opposite sex (see Table 3) (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2015). Indeed, the crux of the puzzle is not only that Japanese

Table 2 Proportion of singles (18 to 34) who are virgins

Sex	2005	2010	2015
Male	31.9%	36.2%	42.0%
Female	36.3%	38.7%	44.2%

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2015)

Table 3 Proportion of singles (18 to 34) who do not have friends of the opposite sex

Sex	1992	2002	2010	2015
Male	47.3%	52.8%	61.4%	69.8%
Female	38.9%	40.3%	49.5%	59.1%

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2015)

singlehood is seemingly involuntary in nature, but also that there is a significant decline in inter-gender interaction among singles as a whole (Matsuda 2005; Yamada and Shirakawa 2008; Cabinet Office 2011; Yamada 2011; Ishida 2013).

Singlehood and cultural uncertainty

Noteworthy here is that there is a significant gap between young people's *ideals* and realistic *expectations* regarding partnership formation. For example, among seven other OECD nations, including the United States, the UK, and South Korea, the ratio of young people (ages 13 to 29) in Japan who have the desire to be married and have children sooner rather than later ranks quite high, while the ratio of those who expect to *actually* be married and raising children by the time they are 40 ranks lowest (Cabinet Office 2014). It can therefore be argued that the puzzle of contemporary Japanese singlehood involves what seems to be a general sense of uncertainty regarding one's future. In the sociohistorical background is the bursting of Japan's financial and real estate bubble that occurred in the early 1990s, and which plunged Japan into 20 years of economic stagnation, the subsequent deregulation and restructuring of the labor market (Amyx 2004; Ahmadjian and Robbins 2005), which has brought down the harsh realities of insecure 'non-regular' employment for an increasing majority of the youth (Genda 2005; Brinton 2011; Cook 2016a), and a generalized sense of uncertainty that cast a shadow over the Japanese populace throughout the two 'lost decades' of the 1990s and 2000s and beyond (Genda 2005; Allison 2015).

When social changes occur abruptly and normative beliefs are suddenly unsupported by social realities, a sense of insecurity surfaces among the populace in various forms of social malaise (Genda 2005; Brinton 2011; Allison 2012). In Japan's case, some have used the term 'affective malaise' to describe the phenomenon in which there is 'a sense that time has stopped, growth is stagnated, hope no longer exists, and ... traces of the reproductive futurism of the past are preserved, kindling a desire for an "ordinary life" that frustrates, and excludes, an increasing many' (Allison 2012; p. 367). To date, this social sentiment has manifested itself in the forms of unprecedentedly high suicide rates among people in their 20s and 30s over the past two decades (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Government of Japan 2016), the emergence of 'acute social withdrawal'

(*hikikomori*) cases (Furlong 2008; Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2011; Saito 2013), as well as a general sense of societal disconnectedness (Hommerich 2012; Allison 2015).

In light of the dramatic and sudden shift that Japanese society made from being a universal culture of security (Estévez-Abe 2008) to a culture of uncertainty (Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2011; Hommerich 2012; Allison 2015), this article examines increasing singlehood as one consequence that this shift has had upon the realm of interpersonal relationships. I argue that not only can Japan's contemporary singlehood phenomenon be understood as a demographic problem (Coulmas 2007) and as triggered by postmodern attitudinal shifts regarding family, as seen in many other advanced industrialized societies (Inglehart and Baker 2000), but it can also be studied as a symptom of 'social behavior' at the cultural level that is specific to the cohort of the 'lost generation' (Brinton 2011) that came of age during the two 'lost decades' and who constitute the majority of never-married singles. Indeed, this lost generation's insecure labor predicaments and their social manifestations have been well-examined by many social scientists (Genda 2005; Brinton 2011; Osawa and Kingston 2015; Cook 2016a, 2016b).

Furthermore, gaining attention within Japan's singlehood paradox is the emergence of non-normative gendered tropes and narratives of and by the singles who embody them. Although Japan is known to harbor more widespread essentialist views of gender compared with most other advanced industrialized nations (Lee *et al.* 2010), traditional 'active male' and 'passive female' ideologies are now being increasingly surmounted by new gender tropes, such as the 'herbivore-type man' (i.e. docile, non-aggressive men) (Morioka 2008, 2013; Charlebois 2013; Nihei 2013) and 'carnivore-type woman' (i.e. proactive, voracious women). This article aims to add to the examination of Japan's singlehood paradox by treating the puzzle as one manifestation of a culture of uncertainty, in which previously hegemonic norms of masculinity and femininity can no longer be sustained by the changed institutions (Ochiai 2011; Mathews 2014), and a sense of normlessness and unpredictability in the realm of 'gender display' (Goffman 1979) and inter-gender communication have ensued.

With the two-decade-long economic stagnation that immediately followed Japan's 'miraculous' (Vogel 1979) postwar economic growth, the 'predictability' and certainty that were the hallmarks of the conveyor-belt society of 'Japan Inc.' have seemingly disappeared. Mary Brinton (2011), whose recent works focus on today's young Japanese who have been 'lost in transition' between the culture of security (pre-bursting of the bubble) and the current culture of uncertainty (post-bursting of the bubble), illustrates the particularly dramatic nature of this shift: 'If Japan in the 1960s-1980s was unusual in the extent to which people followed orderly life courses compared to many other countries, it was unusual as well in the speed and severity with which the foundation for these patterns ... disintegrated in the 1990s' (Brinton 2011, p. 19). Unlike the previous generations of recent

memory that transitioned smoothly into adulthood and family life during Japan's high-growth period and that were 'supported by social institutions that neither required nor rewarded individuals who used ties to acquaintances [...] rather than strong ties to institutions' (Brinton 2011, p. 11), the current generation must contend with forging interactions and communicative ties individually and in the absence of former institutional spaces that mediated interpersonal connections. Furthermore, with the steady disappearance of the workplace-nurtured skills of socialization and communicative action that constituted the Japanese social fabric during Japan's extraordinary high-growth era (Brinton 1993; Brinton and Kariya 1998), post-1990 Japanese society is arguably witnessing a cultural lag where expectations and norms have yet to catch up to significantly altered institutional realities. In other words, this 'lost generation' is tasked with moving through the still-normative life course of employment, marriage, and childbirth in a markedly altered society where normative gender ideologies can no longer be upheld by current institutions.

Based upon a larger qualitative study that I conducted on Japanese singles aged 22 to 39 that partake in the now prevalent phenomenon of 'marriage hunting' (*konkatsu*) (Yamada and Shirakawa 2008) in the Tokyo metropolitan area, this article examines Japanese singles' gendered behavior in the interactional sphere of Japan's dating scene – in particular, the seemingly 'uncertain' ways in which the singles are navigating one's own and others' gendered expectations whilst embodying newly emerging non-normative gender tropes. While notions of a 'herbivorization' of men and a 'carnivorization' of women are found in narratives of and by Japanese singles of childbearing age (Morioka 2008, 2013; Charlebois 2013; Nihei 2013) including those who were respondents for this study, it is the traditional gender scripts that are used by the same demographic to define 'suitable' partners (Ueno and Minashita 2015), the seeming lack of which has been causing the relatively involuntary nature of singlehood in contemporary Japanese society (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2012). In other words, there seems to be a stark mismatch between the gender tropes that the singles are now inadvertently embodying and the gender ideals of Japan's high-growth period that have remained as gender norms and that hold prominence in the singles' expectations for themselves as well as for potential partners.

Singlehood among the 'lost generation'

Extant studies of Japanese singlehood have mainly highlighted the recent changing life aspirations of single women due to their increased economic independence amidst a society replete with systemic gender inequality. For example, studies by Raymo (1998) and Tsuya and Bumpass (2004) focused on single women who have seemingly chosen their careers over marriage due to their

perception of marriage and subsequent family life as a burden. Ono (2003) suggests that highly-educated women in Japan have been opting out of marriage due to their increased income in a society that still imposes nearly all familial caretaking responsibilities upon women. Raymo and Iwasawa (2005) have expanded this further by concluding that delayed marriage or non-marriage is particularly seen among the demographic of high-status women and low-status men, which creates a 'marriage market mismatch' that is sustained by the unchanged tendency of hypergamy (i.e. marrying up) for women and hypogamy (i.e. marrying down) for men. Nemoto's (2008) study examines the effects that the systemic gender inequality in Japan has on the conscious and subconscious decisions that are made by highly-educated female professionals in postponing marriage.

Although the particular demographic examined (college-educated professionals) in these previous studies has indeed shed light upon some meaningful aspects of Japanese singles' views on marriage and relationship formation, the recent trend in neoliberal Japan has been that the proportion of never-married singles who are 'non-regular' employees (i.e. employees with either fixed-term, part-time, or indirect employment with limited benefits and job security) has increased in all age groups and across both sexes, while the proportion of singles who are employed as full-time 'regular' employees has dropped significantly for both men and women compared with the 1990s (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Government of Japan 2013). Cook's (2013, 2014, 2016c) studies on gender-related attitudes and beliefs of unmarried Japanese men in non-regular employment, for example, have offered important insight into the divergent experiences of singlehood that are shared by men of the recent cohorts. Incidentally, the majority of those who are 'effectively single' are those in non-regular employment (Matsuda 2010; Yamada 2011). Thus, examining the contemporary Japanese singlehood phenomenon as exhibiting the 'uncertainty' expressed by the 'lost generation' who are expected to uphold the same societal goals regarding adulthood and gender norms of the recent past but who do not have the same institutional access in achieving them would provide us with an added lens with which to understand this current social predicament.

Methodology

'Marriage hunting' sites

As the fastest aging nation in the world – with one out of four people over 65 years of age, a dwindling labor force, and threatened social welfare and pension plans – the Japanese government declared a 'declining birthrate crisis' in the early 1990s, and has been implementing various countermeasures over the past 25 years (Cabinet Office 2013). The government then revised its focus to also include the increasing trend of marriage postponement and non-marriage seen among young people of childbearing age. This new addition was prodded by statistics that show

the significant influence that marriage postponement and non-marriage have on the declining birthrate (Statistics Bureau 2011; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2011), due to the near-universal precursor of marriage to childbirth in Japanese society (Hertog 2009).¹ Specifically, the Japanese government began incorporating ‘marriage assistance’ programs into its ‘countermeasures for the declining birthrate crisis’ initiatives, allocating 300 million yen, for example, as special funds for such marriage assistance endeavors at the local government level (Cabinet Office 2015). Simultaneously, the private sector began producing ‘meetup’ services for singles, effectively launching a lucrative ‘marriage hunting’ (*konkatsu*) industry, with the top four listed companies collectively amassing 12.3 billion yen in sales (roughly 112 million USD) in 2016 (Myall Ltd. 2016).

It has been argued that, contrary to the ‘Japan Inc.’ era, when local community and networks of ‘strong ties’ at the school and particularly at the workplace served as natural places of mediation among the sexes, now, with the advent of neoliberal policies and non-regular employment as the new norm, formally relied-upon networks have dissolved and the brunt of mediation has fallen upon the individuals themselves (Yamada 2011). Contemporary singles are hence increasingly taking advantage of these ‘marriage hunting’ events to serve as modern-day go-betweens. For my research on these singles, I chose 16 such sites to conduct my participant observation during 2013 and 2014. From these, I conducted 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the various events’ participants, that involved 30 heterosexual never-married women between the ages of 22 and 39, and 20 heterosexual never-married men between the ages of 25 and 44 (see Table 4). The majority of the singles I encountered at the marriage hunting sites fell into two categories: (1) women who currently do not have careers that are financially stable or emotionally meaningful enough for them to consider as a viable substitute for marriage and family life; and (2) men who are in non-regular employment and/or who profess a lack of experience with women. Finally, government surveys and statistics with data on singles, families, marriage, childbirth, and labor published by Japan’s various ministries and agencies were analyzed and applied as context for the results derived from my participant observations and interviews.

These sites and their participants were particularly informative, because such ‘marriage hunting’ events tend to attract self-described ‘herbivore’ men who are predominantly employed in non-regular work or non-professional work rather than the highly-sought-after ‘carnivore men’ who tend to have professional status and/or personalities that align with the traditional masculine ideology of aggressiveness. As one of my female respondents confided, ‘the carnivore men get all the women and the herbivore men get none ... that’s why, like my boss and many of my coworkers, most of the married ones have girlfriends on the side’. In the economically-depressed contemporary Japanese society, seemingly ‘aggressive’ (i.e. confident) men are, as many of my female subjects wistfully stated, ‘rarities’.

Table 4 List of interviewees

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Occupation	Employment type
Meeyu	F	25	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Norika	F	33	Clerical worker	Non-regular, Non-professional
Kana	F	25	Preschool teacher	Regular
Tomi	F	26	Nurse	Regular
Yuko	F	31	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Sayako	F	23	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Natsuki	F	25	Receptionist	Non-regular, Non-professional
Yuki	F	28	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Azuki	F	32	Pharmacist	Regular
Eiko	F	25	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Hiromi	F	27	Architect	Regular
Kei	F	30	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Shiori	F	26	Caretaker	Regular
Seiko	F	34	System engineer	Regular
Ai	F	31	Self-employed	Non-regular, Non-professional
Manami	F	26	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Akane	F	27	Massage therapist	Non-regular, Non-professional
Ikumi	F	30	Waitress	Non-regular
Haruka	F	26	Nutritionist, pre-school	Regular
Kotoko	F	31	Nutritionist, pre-school	Regular
Aina	F	26	Eyelash extension aesthetician	Non-regular, Non-professional
Nao	F	36	Preschool teacher	Regular
Hana	F	32	Store clerk, jewelry store	Non-regular, Non-professional
Wakana	F	36	Temp staff at big firm	Non-regular, Non-professional
Chie	F	28	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Momo	F	26	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Sana	F	26	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Emi	F	23	Store clerk, fashion	Regular, Non-professional
Saki	F	24	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Nanako	F	26	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Eri	F	34	Nutritionist	Regular
Rio	F	29	Clerical worker	Regular, Non-professional
Tomo	M	26	CEO of small start up	Regular
Sho	M	33	Store clerk, furniture store	Regular, Non-professional
Shinji	M	30	Car salesman	Regular, Non-professional
Yasu	M	32	Salaryman	Regular, Non-professional
Hiro	M	35	Hair stylist	Regular
Ryo	M	31	Unemployed	Non-regular, Non-professional
Nobu	M	33	Ex-lawyer, started heyakon	Non-regular
Michito	M	22	Waiter	Non-regular
Kazu	M	29	Salaryman	Regular
Sakabe	M	28	Salaryman	Regular
Saito	M	30	Therapist / Amway distributor	Non-regular, Non-professional
Makoto	M	30	Salaryman	Regular
Tetsu	M	28	Restaurant staff	Regular, Non-professional

(continued)

Table 4 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Occupation	Employment type
Ippei	M	27	System engineer	Regular
Tsutomu	M	27	IT programmer	Regular, Non-professional
Kazuki	M	25	Store clerk, furniture store	Non-regular, Non-professional
Kengo	M	31	Startup	Regular
Kondo	M	25	IT programmer	Regular
Yoneda	M	36	Bar manager	Regular, Non-professional

Ironically, although the very act of attending a ‘marriage hunting’ event demonstrates proactive behavior on the so-called ‘herbivore’ men’s part, attendance itself was not deemed as such by the women nor by the men themselves. Instead, most of these sites included male participants who disclosed their hesitance and ‘need of assistance’ in interacting with women, and the female counterparts mainly included determined ‘carnivore’ women who were clear about their goal to obtain a serious boyfriend who could potentially become a husband.

Rather than focus on the formal ‘marriage-hunting’ sites that include costly matchmaking agencies and entail a wealthier clientele, this study examined the more casual meet-up events called ‘town parties’ (*machikon*) that take place in neighborhood restaurants and bars and are accessible to lower-income singles, ‘group blind dates’ (*gōkon*) that involve casual sit-downs among young singles with ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973), as well as ‘mingling parties’ (*koryupa*, short for *kōryū pāti*) comprising non-student adults who gather under the guise of more platonic socializing. The 16 ‘marriage-hunting’-related sites consisted of four ‘town party’ events that took place in the Tokyo metropolitan area, ranging from central Tokyo (Ginza, Omotesandō, Shinjuku) to the outskirts of Tokyo (Kichijōji); three ‘group blind date’ events ranging from big to small (40-person group in Shinjuku, ten-person group in Shibuya, and four-person group in Shinjuku); two ‘girls-only gathering’ parties that were held as offshoots of ‘marriage hunting’ events and attended by the women who, as one of my respondents claimed, participate in order to ‘commiserate with fellow women about frustrations of not being able to find good men’; one ‘sports gathering’, a variant of ‘town party’ that involves athletic activities and no alcohol; two ‘local eatery-bar for marriage hunting’ (*konkatsu izakaya*) in Shinjuku and Aomono-yokochō; one ‘pick-up’ bar in Ginza; and three ‘mingling parties’ that included one ‘tea party for travelers’ in Shinjuku, one ‘networking party for employed, non-students’ in Gotanda, and one ‘room gathering’ (*heyakon*) event in Shinagawa, which took place at an organizer’s condominium.

These events and sites were selected via two popular ‘marriage hunting’ websites and with the purpose of encountering a diverse group of singles in terms of

urban/suburban locale and economic class. I experienced ease of access to and seamless participation in the above 'marriage hunting' sites due to my then 'never-married and single' status as a 33-year-old Japanese woman. When formally requesting interviews, however, further ease of access was granted when I revealed that I was a researcher from the United States and was consequently seen by the singles as sufficiently foreign in my 'unusually' open demeanor and non-normative expectations to confide in me their love lives (or lack thereof) due to the distance that this non-Japanese context created. This mix of Japanese/non-Japanese qualities allowed my respondents to feel that they would be understood literally, but not judged. It also allowed the female participants to vent to a sympathetic observer rather than feel threatened by a potential rival, and the male participants to 'have a chance to simply enjoy a chat with a friendly woman' as one male respondent put it. Interview questions generally included the length and reason for the respondents' singlehood, their desires for marriage and family formation, and their hopes as well as anxieties regarding partnership formation. These were revised continually according to the themes that began to emerge from inductive coding, which included: the subjects' use of traditional gendered ideals that describe 'suitable' partners, rampant gendered labeling of the available men's 'herbivore'-like behavior by the women and also by some men, expressions of urgency among women to find a partner, and expressions of timidity among men in engaging with women. All names used are pseudonyms for the sake of protecting my respondents' anonymity.

Uncertainty in the realm of relationship formation

Emergence of the 'herbivore-type man' discourse

Through my participant observations and in-depth interviews, I have repeatedly encountered singles using dichotomous labels that illustrate a reversal of the 'active-male/passive-female' gendered binary in order to make sense of their struggles in relationship formation. That is, many of my male respondents described themselves and were described by women as being a 'herbivore type' (i.e. docile and non-aggressive) and women as a 'carnivore type' (i.e. proactive and voracious). In the process of doing so, they also revealed that their ideal 'suitable' partner is someone who fits the traditional gender tropes of the proactive and aggressive 'masculine' man (for women) and the comforting and embracing 'feminine' woman (for men).

Within Japanese popular culture, the term 'herbivore' (*sōshoku*) as a description of traits that counter the traditional masculine norm was first introduced into the Japanese imagination in 2006 by columnist Maki Fukasawa, who labeled Japan's contemporary young men that seem historically less hungry for monetary pursuits, passive in approaching women, and uninterested in pursuing sexual relations as 'herbivore-type men' (*sōshoku-kei danshi*). The term 'herbivore'

(*sōshoku*) was then used in 2007 by a fashion magazine, *With*, to describe the recent emergence of a ‘new herbivore instinct’ among men, and then more famously picked up in 2008 in one of the most widely-read women’s magazines, *Non-no*, which published a special segment on how ‘the yardstick for [female] attractiveness has changed due to the herbivorization of men,’ suggesting that women learn new courtship techniques, and that they ‘do not wait passively’ and ‘approach them instead’. That same year saw two national best-seller books that included ‘herbivore men’ in their titles, and by 2009, ‘herbivore’ was being used in multiple major Japanese news outlets, television shows and films as an adjective to describe certain types of behaviors, appearances, and people that evoked passivity and docility. Upon garnering a coveted spot in the top ten list of the Buzzword of the Year (*ryūkōgo taishō*) at the end of 2009, variants and extensions of this gendered label began to appear throughout Japanese society: the highly sought-after ‘carnivore-type men’ (*nikushoku-kei danshi*) who are proactive in their professional and romantic pursuits and are reminiscent of the ‘corporate warrior’ men of yesteryear that led the Japanese economy to global prominence, the assertive ‘carnivore-type women’ (*nikushoku-kei joshi*) who exude survival instinct in the changed societal landscape as well as a ‘voracity for life,’ and the solitary ‘fasting men’ (*zesshoku-kei danshi*) who claim or are deemed to be asocial, if not asexual. Today, entering the phrase ‘herbivore-type man’ (*sōshokukei danshi*) in the Google Japan search engine garners 983,000 hits in 0.36 seconds (Google Japan 2016).

Specifically, this article highlights the perceived and oft-embodied ‘herbivorization’ of men as constituting one significant characteristic of the recent cohorts’ generation-specific behavior, as this represents a stark contrast to the previously hegemonic masculinity of the ‘corporate warrior’, i.e. the ‘salaried man’ (*sararīman*), that was not merely one aspect, but also constituted the very foundation of the affluent company-centered society of ‘Japan Inc.’. The ‘salaried man’ ideology as hegemonic masculinity has been hitherto discussed in-depth by various scholars (Dasgupta 2003, 2013; Hidaka 2010) as has the newly emergent ‘herbivore’ masculinity as an oppositional form to the previously hegemonic ‘salaryman’ masculinity (Charlesbois 2013; Morioka 2008, 2013; Nihei 2013). Many of my male respondents acknowledged and were ambivalent of this new trope and expressed being aware of their embodiment of it themselves or professed rejection of it as they see it in themselves or in others.

Herbivore behavior deemed ‘unsuitable’

In addressing the question of what exactly constitutes ‘the suitable person’ that my female subjects believed they had yet to meet, most answered: ‘someone who is not a herbivore’. When asked to clarify, they offered these traditional gendered characterizations: ‘someone who can lead me’, ‘someone who can take initiative’, ‘someone who is decisive’, ‘someone who can hold a conversation’ and ‘someone

who is strong and positive'. They also almost always added: 'someone with a stable job'. Natsuki, a 25-year-old receptionist lamented: 'It's because the men have become herbivores that the women *have to* become carnivores'. Other female respondents echoed Natsuki's lament with the explanation that women are having to be more proactive in pursuing the men because the men are no longer doing the pursuing. The sentiment was that they acknowledge the increasing 'carnivore'-esque quality seen among themselves and other single women, but that they are ambivalent, if not bitter, about having to take on this quality in order to obtain their partnership and family life goals.

Yuko, an extroverted 33-year-old woman who works at a small watchmaking company said incredulously, 'I would hear a guy say, "I really liked that girl", after having attended a *gōkon* ['group blind date']. And then I'd ask if he got in touch with her afterwards and he'd matter-of-factly say, "nope", and be content with that'. Twenty-five-year-old preschool teacher Kana revealed that she met a man at one of the 'town parties' who hadn't had a girlfriend in over ten years: 'I asked him why, and he said that he wasn't able to take the initiative to approach anyone. I was shocked'. Her 26-year-old friend Tomi raised an eyebrow and said, 'I was actually talking to the same guy! We were hitting it off, so I thought for certain that he would contact me later, but he hasn't contacted me at all!' The general consensus among the female participants I interviewed was that, from their point of view, the 'herbivore' stereotype does exist in actuality and is manifest in the men they meet, who, in turn, appear to them as 'unsuitable'. The women I interviewed viewed their own singlehood status as significantly caused by this 'passivity' exhibited by prospective partners.

On one end of the herbivore 'spectrum', is 27-year-old programmer Tsutomu. I was able to secure an interview with him after having interviewed his self-proclaimed 'herbivore' friend, who assured me, 'You're going to want to talk to Tsutomu. He's "*the herbivore*". Tsutomu was pale and slight of build and pushed his glasses up his nose every so often as he carefully deliberated his answers to my questions. When I opened our interview by thanking him for agreeing to talk with me, he replied, 'It's not every day I get the chance to talk to a woman, so I said yes to him [his friend] immediately when he told me about you and this interview'. Tsutomu described himself as 'beyond herbivore ... nearly fasting' (delivered in a non-ironic and matter-of-fact tone in the same manner with which he told me his name), and shared that he lives with his parents and his younger sister in his natal home, has never had a girlfriend or even friends that are female, and enjoys going to the arcade by himself on his days off from work. Although Tsutomu is intrigued by the idea of women and desires to get to know some, he claimed that he has never considered going to a 'marriage hunting' event. He likened attending a social gathering such as that to 'going to a foreign country', implying that it seems too much outside of his reach or his comfort zone.

Seemingly towards the other end of the 'herbivore' spectrum is 30-year-old car salesman Shinji, a conventionally attractive young man who wore a fitted suit

and carried an iPad to one of the ‘marriage hunting’ events that I attended. However, upon second glance, he revealed ‘herbivore’-like qualities, as he never approached a female participant for the entirety of the event, he rarely left the comfort of the wall except to exchange business cards with another male participant, and seemed oblivious to the positive attention he was receiving from the female participants. After chatting to him, he revealed, ‘Actually, I came here to challenge myself ... to get myself to break out of my shell. I’m able to put my best foot forward at work, but I’m very shy when it comes to social situations that involve talking to women. I had to force myself to come out tonight’. When I asked him why he was carrying around an iPad and nothing else, he replied with some degree of satisfaction, ‘so that I can get approached and asked that very same question ... I thought it could be an icebreaker’. From an objective standpoint, Shinji’s efforts (or any other male participants’ efforts) to connect with women by attending the event cannot technically be deemed ‘passive’ or ‘herbivore’-like due to the initiative, and often times courage, it took to register for the event. And yet, to the female participants and to himself as well, Shinji represented a typical herbivore, despite the reality that truly ‘herbivore’-like men would not even think about attending something of that nature.

Finally, there is also the self-proclaimed herbivore Saito, a 30-year-old Amway distributor and part-time employee at a massage therapy clinic. He revealed matter-of-factly, ‘one time, I had to crash at a business motel because I missed the last train and there was no other way home. And one of my female friends also missed her train, so she asked if she could just crash in the same hotel room as me. And we were there together in that small hotel room, and I never laid a hand on her. I kind of wanted to, but I was waiting to see if she’d make a move on me. I just can’t take the initiative. I want to be the one who’s led.’ Other male participants at the ‘marriage-hunting’ sites may not have expressed their ‘herbivore’-like qualities to this extent. However, the cognizance and even embracing by the single men of this non-normative gender ideology was palpable throughout the interactions that occurred in the ‘marriage-hunting’ sphere.

Some of the self-proclaimed ‘carnivore’ men I interviewed outside of the ‘marriage-hunting’ sites seemed to deplore the prevalence of such a non-normative display of masculinity. Twenty-eight-year-old Sakabe, who works as a regular employee at a credit card company while organizing his own ‘marriage-hunting’ events for others, declared, ‘I think of myself as one hundred percent carnivore. I actually don’t think there are any herbivores out there. I think everyone is actually a carnivore inside, but that they’re just lacking in courage’. Twenty-six-year-old Tomo, a young CEO of his own start-up company, shared: ‘I’d like to think of myself as a carnivore. Herbivores are passive. Some of my buddies are herbivores. I’d set up a group date and they’d meet women whom they like, but they never seal the deal. They don’t take the next step in getting their numbers and following up with them afterwards.’ The other self-proclaimed carnivores who universally had

stable employment and expressed some form of passion for upward mobility expressed a similar lament towards the emergence of this new 'herbivore' gender trope. It can be argued that for those who are in a position to still benefit from the 'traditional' model of masculinity that characterized Japan's economic heyday, the very emergence of non-normative gender tropes is looked upon with criticism or denial, because it poses a threat to the reliability and security they hope to find in society and life as a Japanese male.

Persistent traditional gender norms

From my male respondents' perspective, what constitutes the ideal 'suitable person' was described as the following: 'someone easy to talk to', 'someone like an older sister' (culturally speaking, someone indulgent), and 'someone who won't negate me and who will validate me'. The general consensus could be summarized with one oft-cited adjective in describing the attractive female mate: the 'comforting-type' (*iyashikei*). The single men that I interviewed also emphasized that the 'suitable' woman would be positive and bright, but certainly 'not voracious' (*gatsu gatsu shiteinai*), because this 'carnivorosity' would imply a sense of aggression. This is consistent with the trend that, although there is an increase in single men who have unknowingly come to embody new gender tropes that evoke opposite traits from that of the 'salaryman' ideology, the previously hegemonic masculinity of the 'corporate warrior' has remained within the national psyche, so much so that even a 'freeter' (*furitā*) (part-time contract-based worker) would adhere to traditional gender norms of being the 'head of household' in a marriage, and would desire to be treated as such by his partner, regardless of his inability to provide financial security as sole breadwinner (Cook 2014). This trend is echoed in Nemoto, Fuwa, and Ishiguro (2013) study that analyses the ambivalence that never-married employed men feel about marriage under a veneer of a stated desire for marriage as well as these men's preference for the traditional division of labor in marriages.

They may, for example, find the following female respondent ideal: 25-year-old Meeyu, a noticeably attractive and fashionable clerical worker who attended a 'marriage-hunting' party with her friends solely 'to provide them with moral support'. She insisted during her interview,

it's the women who are turning the men into herbivores. Women need to show more deference to men. I've been with my boyfriend for seven years now, and I think being able to do that is the difference between a girl who can keep a guy and a girl who can't. Like, if you're out to dinner and the food comes, you let him take the first bite from the dish while it still looks perfect. You know, a little bit like the old times.

Although Meeyu also professed a desire to continue working even after marriage and childbirth and considered supportiveness of that desire an 'absolutely

necessary' quality in a male partner, her gender display is a clear embodiment of the traditional gender norms that upheld the postwar urban nuclear family that comprised a sole male breadwinner 'salaryman' and his professional housewife.

One of my aforementioned female subjects, 26-year-old nurse Tomi, stated,

I have a dream of becoming an anime voiceover actor someday, but that would probably be off-putting to guys, so I usually just share with them my current occupation [nurse]. I put on that 'nightingale' face to make them an 'offer'... like, could this [while striking a pose] suit your fancy?

Although Tomi had never been in a romantic relationship, she used her sense of what constitutes normative feminine qualities and exaggerated them in the interactional sphere. Thirty-four-year-old Eri, a conventionally attractive nutritionist whom I met at a 'mingling party', had been proactively participating in various 'marriage hunting' events, because she has a strong desire to 'be married within the year'. She, too, used an exaggerated normative female gender trope in her effort to achieve her marital goals, as she divulged that her strategy for approaching men at 'marriage hunting' sites was to emphasize her 'cooking abilities and nutritionist job skills'. 'You know what they say, the stomach is the way to a man's heart,' she explained. Similar to Tomi, Eri highlighted her occupation as a tactic to imply to the men that she would make a good caretaker within the domestic sphere. How effective this strategy is, however, is not clear. During a follow-up conversation, both Tomi and Eri lamented not having had much luck being asked out on a date. From the male participants' perspective, these female participants' strategizing behavior may appear to them as masked aggressiveness despite the 'comforting' feminine characterizations that were displayed on the surface.

Brinton (2011) explains that Japan's 'lost generation' who came of age during the drastic and prolonged economic recession is manifesting behavioral and communicative anomie, or normlessness, because the 'stock of common strategies' for navigating the social landscape have become 'obsolete in the depressed economic circumstances' (Brinton 2011, p. 12). During Japan's economic heyday, for example, women could almost universally expect to be talked to or looked at by the opposite sex simply upon making an appearance at a social gathering. However, as my female respondents shared, women are increasingly finding the need to be the ones to take the initiative when it comes to inter-gender interaction, particularly with 'herbivore'-like men. Moreover, it is noteworthy that my female respondents deliberately displayed exaggerated gender-specific behavior and conformed to the traditional feminine ideal as a means, albeit a seemingly unsuccessful one, to attract potential marriage partners. Takeda (2005) offers that 'the situation in which they [contemporary young women] are driven to choose to stick to the conventional model of the family as a means of self-enterprise in contemporary Japan seems to be derived from the limitations surrounding

them' (Takeda 2005, p. 186). The strict economic realities of post-bubble Japan (Kato 2001; Jung and Cheon 2006) in addition to the persistently severe gender inequality in Japan's labor market (Yu 2009; Chang and England 2011; Broadbent 2012) have seemingly led many young women to become more 'aggressive' in securing their livelihood by way of a traditional marriage rather than contend with the highly gender-unequal and increasingly de-regulated labor market.

Uncertain gender display

Goffman (1979, p. 1) introduced the notion of 'gender display' as 'conventionalized portrayals of 'culturally established correlates of sex'. 'Gender displays' are 'rituals,' and 'like other rituals, can iconically reflect fundamental features of the social structure' (Goffman 1979, p. 8). Furthermore, in order 'to be successful, marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands' (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 135). A 'successful' gender display, then, requires the actor's cognizance of a normative gender script as well as the actor's ability to effectively communicate and perform its portraiture to his or her audience.

Not only were the female participants unsuccessful in appealing to the opposite sex as their use of exaggerated traditional gender norms were unwelcomed by the men who have come to embody a new 'herbivore'-like gender trope, the male participants, too, seemed to have difficulty 'displaying gender' in a manner that appealed to the opposite sex. One difference here is that rather than that being also due to a use of exaggerated traditional gender tropes, it was more so due to their inability to communicate *with*, instead of *at*, the female participants, as will be explained below. Although it can be argued that 'gender expressions are by way of being a mere show' (Goffman 1979, p. 8), what I observed in my fieldwork were 'shows' that seemed to neglect empathy for its audience. During the requisite self-introduction time at one of the 'town parties', for example, the man sitting across the four-person-table from me, 25-year-old IT worker Kondō, introduced himself as a 'shy guy' and pointed to the pair of sunglasses resting on my head, commenting, 'You know, I love collecting glasses... [dramatic pause]... but only funny ones'! After being prodded by others at the table to elaborate on what he meant, Kondō reached down into his bag and produced several comedic shaded glasses with different eyes drawn onto them explaining, 'I always have several of these at hand'. He chose a pair that had pouty eyes drawn on them and put them on his face as he continued, 'see, if I were my friend, I'd be able to say something funny to make you laugh while I have these on. But since I can't, what I do is make faces'. Kondō then made his lips pout with exaggeration to match the pouty eyes on the glasses. A wave of silence enveloped our table for a brief moment followed by a polite, sympathetic applause, at which point Kondō

removed the comedic glasses and returned them to his bag with what appeared to be a sense of accomplishment.

This performance episode was representative of similar efforts that I observed among other male participants who seemed content with completing the displays themselves rather than concerned with how the ‘display’ reached his audience. During a timed one-on-one session at one ‘local eatery-bar for marriage hunting’ (*konkatsu izakaya*) that I attended, I sat across the table from a soft-spoken man in his early 40s who introduced himself as being from one of the smaller islands. He then proceeded to ask with gusto, ‘so, which one of the islands do you think I’m from?’ I offered some of the most popular and well-known Japanese islands that immediately came to mind, and with each guess, he more confidently responded, ‘No. Guess again!’. To my surprise, he persisted with this guessing game, and the subsequent few minutes consisted of my wrong guesses, his ambiguous hints, and gleeful ‘Guess again!’s. My periodic exclamations of ‘I give up’ were left unheard, and by the time he finally revealed which island he was from, the allotted face-to-face time was over for that round and he had to move on to the next table. I was forced to take note of the fact that, even in my objective research position, I experienced a sense of fatigue and disconnect from trying to interact with a person who seemed encouraged by his own persistence at ‘communication’ while failing to actually engage his conversation partner. The actor’s ‘readiness to subscribe to the conventions of display’, which Goffman (1979, p. 8) takes for granted as a person’s natural ability, does not seem to apply to the singles who live within the uncertain social fabric of today’s Japanese society. In the contemporary social landscape, the singles that I observed at the ‘marriage hunting’ sites seemed to ‘miss the mark’ in regards to their gender displays and their intended audience’s reception of them. Indeed, there seems to be a mismatch between the singles’ partnership goals and the effectiveness of the means by which the singles hope to achieve them.

Discussion

In the economically thriving Japanese society of yesteryear, ‘trusting or exchanging information with acquaintances or strangers was neither the dominant nor the most effective strategy’ (Brinton 2011, p. 12). Now, however, communication with acquaintances or strangers is precisely what is required to build new relationships amidst the dissolving socioeconomic institutions of trust that previously served as the bedrock for ‘strong ties’ and social networks. In this changed social climate, the singles’ seeming inability to successfully interact with the opposite sex arguably points to not only a confused valuation of normative ways of being masculine and feminine, but also an overall manifestation of societal uncertainty in regards to human interaction as well as a lack of tools for building relationships within the absence of traditional spaces of institutionalized mediation.

Brinton (2011, p. xvii) attributes the cause of this generational quality as existing in 'a fundamental realignment and reorganization of ... Japan's distinctive "human capital development system".' Specifically, this struggle is due to contemporary Japanese society having abruptly departed from the 'distinctive way that postwar Japanese society was organized before the 1990s', which involved the importance 'for individuals to be attached to a *ba* ["social location"]' (Brinton 2011, p. 3). Merely two decades ago, for example, many male identities were solely constructed around their companies where human interaction was mediated and clear social scripts were available. Moreover, as Iwasawa and Mita (2005) point out, the role of matchmaker that the corporation used to play during the 1960s and 1970s has dwindled without replacement. Without such attachments to 'social locations,' the recent cohorts are mainly on their own in the realms of communication, networking, and partnership formation.

Indeed, in this paradox – where not only has 'effective singlehood' increased, but also an overall plummeting of inter-gender communication and interaction has occurred among the very singles who desire to be married and have families someday – it is helpful when attempting to understand its puzzling components to study this phenomenon as constituting one aspect of a much larger socio-historical shift that has produced a 'culture of uncertainty' for society as a whole. Perhaps, then, what the contemporary Japanese singlehood paradox and its discontents open up is the possibility for assessing current institutions and the roles they may play in effectively integrating the younger generation, so that the ever-increasing singles may regard their future with more certainty, and experience the present with more connectivity.

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Note

1. It is increasingly the case among post-industrialized societies that childbirth does not have to be preceded by marriage – a cursory view of the rates of childbirth that occur outside of wedlock among various OECD nations, for example, gives one the impression that efforts towards increasing a country's birthrate would have little to do with increasing the country's marriage rate. In 2008, the rates of children born outside of wedlock was 31.7% for Spain, 32.1% for Germany, 40.6% for the United States, 46.2% for Denmark, 52.6% for France, and 54.7% for Sweden (Ministry to Health Labor and Welfare 2013). As for Japan, however, the rate was a mere 2.1% (*ibid.*). This is because alternative forms of partnership (e.g. cohabitation) have not yet gained sociocultural legitimacy in Japan as they have in other nations, mainly due to the prominent role that the Family Register (*koseki*) has played in modern Japanese society, where households and not individuals have been entitled to various social welfare rights and protections. Moreover, the 'legitimacy' of children's births has long been considered a significant component of the Civil Code clauses that pertain to the topics of inheritance and rights of succession. In 1995, the Tokyo Court of Appeals finally deleted the term 'illegitimate child'

(*shiseishi*) from the resident card; and yet, in the same year, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of Article 900 paragraph 4 that discriminates against illegitimate children regarding rights of succession. It was not until late 2013 that the Supreme Court overturned its previous decision and, for the first time, deemed the clause in the Civil Code that discriminates against illegitimate children as unconstitutional. *De facto* discrimination takes a significantly longer time to cease compared with *de jure* discrimination; hence, stigmatization of illegitimate children and their unwed mothers is still prevalent and normatively powerful within the general Japanese social sentiment. This is arguably the main reason behind the shockingly low rate of out-of-wedlock childbirths in Japan, thereby making marriage a near-universal precursor to childbirth (Hertog 2009).

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