

# **The 2019 Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology**

*“Revitalization and Representation”*

*Conference Proceedings Papers*

January 23-26, 2019

Royal Angkor Resort  
Siem Reap, Cambodia

*Hosted by*  
The Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia

*The Conference on*  
ASIAN LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY  
2019  
Siem Reap, Cambodia  
<https://cala2019.cala.asia>

The CALA 2019 Proceedings Paper 1 - 2

*Gender and Sexuality, Paper 2*

**Men and Monsters: Hunting for Love Online in  
Japan**

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# Men and Monsters: Hunting for Love Online in Japan

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of initial fieldwork on Online dating (*netto-jô konkatsu*, *koikatsu*) and other types of internet-based partner matching options in Japan, focusing on the possibilities for textual and interactional self-representation on different sites and apps available to single Japanese. This includes widespread international apps like Tinder and Grindr, along with local apps like 9 Monsters, a popular gay app that also incorporates light gaming functions, or Zexy En-Musubi, a revolutionarily egalitarian site aimed at heterosexual singles specifically seeking marriage.

I approach this question by looking at the different technological affordances for profile creation using these services, and the ways users engage with those affordances to create profiles and to search for partners, based on examinations of websites, apps, and public profiles; interviews with website producers; and ethnographic interviews with past and current users of Online dating services. I primarily argue that self-presentation in Japanese Online dating hinges on the use of polite speech forms towards unknown readers, which have the power to flatten out gendered speech differences that are characteristic of language ideologies in Japan (Nakamura 2007). However, dominant cultural ideas about gender, sexuality, and marriage—such as patriarchal marriage structures—may still be “baked into” the structure of apps (Dalton and Dales 2016).

Studying Online dating in Japan is critical because of its growing social acceptance. While in 2008 the only “respectable” site was a Japanese version of Match.com, in 2018 there are numerous sites and apps created by local companies for local sensibilities. Where Online dating was already established, in the West, there was little sociological study of it while it was becoming popular, in part because research on the internet also lacked respectability. By looking at Japan, where acceptance is growing but Online dating has not yet been normalized, we can gain a deeper understanding of its gender, sexuality, romance, and marriage practices. Japan’s experiences can also potentially provide a model for understanding how Online dating practices might develop elsewhere. In the US, Online dating faced many of the stigmas that it continues to face in Japan—such as that it was “sleazy,” “sketchy,” or desperate. In spite of these stigmas, however, Online dating grew slowly until it suddenly exploded (Orr 2004). Will it explode in Japan? By looking at how people use these sites, this paper also hopes to shed light on the uptake of Online partner matching practices.

*Keywords:* Japan, Love, Online modes, Polite speech

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In this paper, I discuss self presentation in Online dating, specifically, Online dating in Japan. I give particular attention to the question of how the design affordances of particular Online dating apps, along with documentation such as rules, FAQs, and example profiles, help to partially structure how users construct their own profiles. What I argue is that profile construction in Online dating depends on three factors: The first factor is emerging local and global norms of what constitutes a good profile. So, for example, American Tinder users may have noticed men holding up fish on their Tinder profiles, a phenomenon to which multiple Tumblr blogs have been dedicated. Another aspect is the design of the app. Profile construction depends in part on what sort of fields have been provided for the user to fill in, as well as on which are mandatory, and which are optional. Finally, it also depends on what kinds of guidance are given to users when they create their profiles, upload pictures, or write profile text. Guidelines for acceptable pictures or measures of profile completion have an effect on the extent to which users fill out profiles, and what they put in them when they do.

Online dating in Japan is particularly interesting for a few reasons. One is that Online dating is something that is growing in popularity in Japan as opposed to being already established, as it is in the West, or not really existing at all. In Japan, we can see a culture of Online dating developing along with locally produced apps and cultures of profile creation and interpretation. Japan is also interesting because Western notions of dating and courtship often do not apply very well. Historically, we know that dating was introduced by interactions between American servicemen and Japanese women during the occupation following the Second World War (McLelland 2010). In addition to dating being a relatively recent introduction, Online dating has been particularly slow to take hold, perhaps because Japanese Online forums and social media have strong norms of anonymity or pseudonymity. Barker and Ota (2011), for example, highlight this in the use of pseudonyms and diaries in the Japanese social networking site Mixi, as compared to the popularity of photographs and real names on Facebook. However, things are changing. Around 2012, Facebook started to become genuinely popular in Japan for the first time. Also into 2012, the Facebook app Omiai launched and was immediately a huge hit. Omiai is the Japanese word for a formal introduction between two single people that is arranged by parents or matchmakers, but here it just refers to the app introducing and matching people. However, this app could only become a huge success because people had already started using Facebook under their real names in a way that they had not previously engaged with others Online (Miyamoto and Seo 2012; Gilhooly 2012). Other changes include industry driven changes in terminology that make Online dating websites seem more acceptable and less sleazy to the casual user. Here Omiai is also a good example—the name of the app purposefully invokes older Japanese matchmaking practices to establish its own acceptability.

In the remainder of this paper, I present three websites or apps: Tinder, Nine Monsters, and Zexy En-Musubi. Each website is designed according to a different model, and as a result, we can see clear patterns—or the lack thereof—in profiles from each of these three sites. The data presented here is based on a qualitative analysis of about 30 profiles from each gender from each site, where pictures were described and coded, along with features of the profile text. Tinder is an obvious juggernaut that has been the subject of much research, but it is actually rather popular in Japan, used by Japanese citizens, resident migrants, and travellers. Tinder has minimal guidance for users and minimally structured profile architecture. Consequently, I found very little patterning in the profiles that I examined, to the point that even attempts to code pictures and text proved largely futile. The second app, Nine Monsters, is a domestically

produced app aimed at gay men, and used by Japanese gay men along with resident migrants. This app presents a somewhat happy medium in terms of design. There is some guidance on the app, there is some structure built into the profiles, and there is also some kind of emergent structure in terms of users creating their own patterns of profile construction, within the clearly defined but fairly minimal framework presented by the app. The third app is Zexy En-Musubi, which is a Japanese produced site and app for people who are looking to get married. Unlike the previous two, it is exclusively heterosexual. One thing that distinguishes Zexy En-Musubi from similar sites is that there is extensive guidance and structure in profile creation and consequently, a certain homogeneity to users' profiles.

Starting with Tinder, I look at some of the details of how profiles are put together. Tinder has no search function: It only shows you nearby users in an algorithmically determined order. What the user sees when browsing is basically a big picture of a person. At the bottom is their name and age, and on the first picture, we can also see if the user has filled in the fields for their job and/or their school. There is no text, but rather, a button-based interface that is somewhat, but not entirely, self-explanatory. If users want more information about the person currently being displayed, they can click the information button (a little letter "i" in a circle). What Tinder does is present pictures, primarily, and makes users work to view written aspects of the profile. When editing a Tinder profile, the very first thing the user sees is multiple slots for uploading pictures, and then next is a general 'About Me' section, followed by the option to connect various social media accounts. Note that there is no guidance here for the user provided on the profile creation page itself—just blank, minimally labelled, fields, none of which are mandatory. It is possible for users to, in fact, have an almost entirely blank profile on Tinder. There is some guidance provided, buried at the end of the 'settings' tab in the app, but it pertains mostly to dating safely or behaviors that will result in account suspension, more so than help. There is also a link to help documentation, but this answers primarily mechanical questions about the app. (So, users confused about the buttons can, with some work, find out.)

Moving on to Nine Monsters, we find a simple profile featuring this lovely gentleman and his abdomen. Nine Monsters has a variety of different fields that can be filled in, in addition to the general 'about me' section. Some have to do with a game component in the app, but most are supplied by users: name, age, height, weight, place of residence, ethnicity, languages, hobbies, etc. As with Tinder, users can connect their social media accounts to their Nine Monsters profiles, but the social media that users can connect is much more text-based than anything on Tinder (Instagram vs. Twitter). Finally, when it comes to the images, the upload screen contains very specific guidance as to what pictures should show (the user's face and body), along with guidelines for things that may not be shown (mostly genitalia). There is also a big helpful button that takes users to a page with more detailed image posting guidelines. Within the app, there is also a frequently asked questions section and a beginners' guide for new users. This is in stark contrast to Tinder, where it is much easier to come across ways to subscribe to Tinder's paid service in the event where users want perks such as being able to hide their age or change location, than it is to come across information about how to construct a profile.

Finally, there is the case of Zexy En-Musubi. This is a site that is aimed at people specifically looking to get married, and is generally used only by people who have a strong connection to Japan (Japanese citizens, a small number of foreign residents of Japan, and some Japanese

<sup>1</sup> Tinder can also be used on the web, and it is worth noting that its web interface provides easier access to help documentation. Nine Monsters can only be used as an app.

overseas who hope to establish a romance when they return home). Tinder and Nine Monsters come in multiple languages; Zexy En-Musubi can only be used in Japanese, which says a great deal about its target audience. The app version for iOS is only available in the Japanese app store so I was not able to download it for research. Thus, I deal only with the web version in my discussion here<sup>1</sup>. First of all, on the front page of the website (<https://zexy-enmusubi.net/>), in the top corner, there is an information menu. So any user, registered or not, can find out quickly what Zexy En-Musubi is. It gives users information about meeting people, using the website safely, and tips for increasing the number of matches they make. There are also help and frequently asked questions pages that are easily findable and readily available.

Next, there is the design of the profiles. Zexy En-Musubi profiles have many detailed fields for users to fill out (or not—most of them are not mandatory). In addition to providing basic information about oneself such as name, age, sex, etc., it is possible to populate fields describing the user's current lifestyle, what they are seeking in a marriage partner, what kind of life they imagine after marriage (for example, who works?), and so on. On the left is a profile picture (with the option to upload additional pictures). On the right, if you are looking at your own profile, it will tell you how complete your profile is. There are also little tips all over the page, encouraging users to employ site features in particular ways. For example, it reminds the user that if they log in every day, they get five 'likes.' The site wants users to know that these tools for interacting with other users are available, and that they can and should be used.

Most of the options on these multifaceted profiles are constrained by drop-down menus, although they are very thorough drop-down menus with a wide number of choices. But finally, I consider what happens when a user goes to edit the one free text field on the site—the self-introduction. The web interface encourages the user to write an introduction while explaining its purpose. The site also provides one of twelve sample profile texts, which are by and large gender-neutral, and are useable by anyone. This text is fairly simple: Hello, nice to meet you, thank you for looking at my profile. But importantly, it offers a place to start. Users who are still confused after looking at the example text can click on a helpful button to get a different sample, or they can click on another helpful button and it will give them hints for profile writing. What is notable when looking at Zexy En-Musubi is the extent to which it is very tightly structured, but users are also supported at every step along the way. Profiles reflect this, with a consistency but also a thoroughness that I did not find on Tinder or Nine Monsters. Just very briefly, we can see how this works by looking at how these users describe their ideal relationships. Across both men's and women's profiles, and of course most profiles that I looked at, you can clearly see that users are using the similar language to talk about who they are, what they like to do, and what they want in life. For example, take these two representative statements from a woman's profile and a man's profile, about the kinds of relationships that they desire.

**Female user:** 大好きな人とたくさんの感情や経験を共有して、色んなことを一緒に

乗りて、いつも笑顔で過ごせれば良いなと思います。

*I want to share many experiences and emotions with the person I love, I want to overcome challenges with them, and I think it's good if we can go through life always smiling.*

**Male user:** お互いの存在が日々の力になれるような関係が理想です!

*My ideal relationship is one where our life together becomes a source of our everyday strength!*

In conclusion, I aim to summarize some of the practical effects on profiles that we can see, related to the structure of site and app design. In general, it seems that the more structure and support for the user that is built into the app or website, the more structure that you see in profile creation. This suggests that users are confused, uncertain, or nervous, for the most part, and therefore happy to follow directions and suggestions. Given that Online dating is new in Japan and conventions for producing these kinds of self-presentation text objects may not be well established, it is unsurprising that users would find this kind of guidance welcome. When users have less support and guidance within the app, we see substantially more divergent usage. This can most clearly be illustrated by what we find by looking at Nine Monsters. In a Nine Monsters profile, pictures are front and center, right at the top, but they are much smaller than Tinder pictures, which take up the whole screen. The picture is not everything. In addition to the fact that the pictures are smaller, they are also all in one tab—no extra tapping or clicking is required to get to the text data. However, unlike Zexy En-Musubi, the text fields are also limited and much less overwhelming.

Generally, this leads to more personal information in profiles, especially as compared with Tinder. If we compare just the male users of Tinder that I sampled with the (all-male) users of Nine Monsters, in general, we can see that there are fewer empty profiles (4/30), compared to Tinder (9/30).

Nine Monsters profiles also tend to generally be longer. I measured this in the screens' worth of information; How much scrolling you have to do to read the whole profile. With Tinder, users barely need to scroll, if they even look at the text at all. With Nine Monsters, due to the smaller pictures and different text fields, scrolling through multiple screens is the norm—and users did also tend to write more. Finally, in Nine Monsters, we see some emergent forms of profile writing, where users are creatively repurposing features of the site, and developing some of their own frameworks for interaction. I initially noticed this when I saw users using the English word 'unlock,' and putting in their profile that they 'have unlocks.' Reading through Online dating profiles is a crash course in Japanese erotic slang, but this required me a friend's assistance to parse. His explanation was that 'unlock' refers to the ability of users to send additional pictures in messages through the chat functions of the app. So, pictures that were too risqué to be put directly on the profile could be 'unlocked' by users through direct interaction. Finally, I want to point out that Nine Monsters has a unique kind of feed, where users make short, Twitter-like, posts called 'howls.' Howls can be seen by anybody, and are used to express a current mood, or immediate desire, such as for tea or sex. This creates a culture of writing and broadcasting users' statuses within the app, and a low-stakes form of interaction beyond 'liking' a profile or sending a message. With an intermediate level of structure built into it, the structure and even the restrictions of the Nine Monsters app design serve to create a culture of avid interaction among users, and new terminology for describing those desired interactions.

Ultimately, there are two theoretical points that we can take away from this concrete example. One is that self-presentation, self-construction, and gender performance all happen within a framework that structures our communicative possibilities. We can not understand why users present themselves as they do without looking at the technological context of the choices that they are making. The Japanese case is a particularly instructive one here, because there is not as much of a fixed sense of what a profile is even supposed to look like—we can see a diversity of choices and also a diversity of app designs from local and international users and local and international app creators. But also, as we can see clearly from the example of Nine

Monsters, technology is not destiny. Whilst app designers can try to program one experience for users, they cannot guarantee that users will stay entirely within the bounds that have been set for them.

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