'Shinu Shika Nai' – 'There is Nothing to Do but to Die': Contextualising the Rising Young Female Suicide Rate in Japan

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the suicide rate for the 18-39 age cohort of Japanese women has been drastically subverting a long period of prior sustained decline. This work is an anthropological study of social conditions contributing to a social zeitgeist in which these young women are taking their own lives, as told in survivor and advocate testimonies. It seeks to question the ways ideas around what suicide means in the Japanese cultural context to stakeholders in the suicide process. It further elucidates how these ideas exist, and how they have evolved to be meaningful to young women in contemporary Japan.

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Dedications

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Introduction

"SUICIDE (from Lat. *sui*, of oneself, and *cidium*, from *caedere*, to kill), the act of intentionally destroying one's own life. The phenomenon of suicide has at all times attracted a large amount of attention from moralists and social investigators. Its existence is looked upon, in Western civilization, as a sign of the presence of maladies in the body politic which, whether remediable or not, deserve careful examination. It is, of course, impossible to compare Western civilisation in this respect with, say, Japan, where suicide in certain circumstances is part of a distinct moral creed".

-Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th Edition. Volume 26 (1911, p.50)

Background to the proposed study:

Since 2019, the national suicide rate in Japan has been bucking a 10-year-long downwards trend, with the rate increasing year-on-year especially among young women. Analyses of these women's demographic information by suicidologists in Japan have revealed that there are three emerging at-risk groups. These groups consist of students, young professionals/job seekers, and those defined by sociologists as being "economically vulnerable", with a focus specifically on those aged 18-39, who (Ueda, 2021a) has stated are particularly vulnerable. Therefore, the proposed study focuses on what the emerging challenges are for these groups that might go some way to explaining the rising suicide rate.

Literature Review

Within the field of suicide studies, only a small fraction (approximately 1.33%) of research is qualitative or from an anthropological or sociological approach (Agerbo et al, 2009).

Atkinson (1978) and Douglas (1967) both criticise the discipline for this. A further criticism is that the statistics are most often not collected by sociologists for the purposes of research. In order to fully understand a situation, they argue that an ethnomethodological approach by anthropologists is "possibly the only answer to the problems" usually found in the discipline (Douglas, 1967, p.187). The main problem highlighted for the discipline by these scholars that this study attempts to address is that when dealing with datasets related to something as personal as suicide, statistics alone are insufficient to understanding real, lived experiences. Studies such as Durkheim's (1897) which established suicide studies as a distinct sub-discipline of sociology in its own right have had the drawback of utilising suicide statistics in macro-properties terms to attempt, often erroneously, to analyse and explain micro-events contributing to those statistics. Therefore, by analysing the thought processes of those witnessing the society in-which these micro-events occur (in the case of the interview data), and those who experience suicidal ideation themselves (in the case of the vlog data), we can mitigate this shortfall in current studies of suicide in Japan. The flaw itself, termed 'Simpson's paradox' "arises from the combination of an ignored confounding variable and a disproportionate allocation of the variable" (Ameringer et al., 2009, pp.123-124). A qualitative study and analysis of viewpoints on what society looks like for people within the identified 'at-risk groups', parallel to an analysis of vloggers who fall into those 'at-risk groups' as case studies, is appropriate for going some way to filling the gap academia currently has in understanding the issue.

Ethnographic literature on the topic is limited, but there are a handful of modern scholars who have provided some groundwork for this study. Commenting on her ethnographic interviews of men and women with depression, Kitanaka (2012) remarked on the marked differences in how participants experienced mental health preconditions to suicidal ideation. Compared to men, "women almost always raised multiple possible causes for depression up front" (p.134). The "experience of depression takes on different forms according to gender […] because the nature of their 'social suffering' is structured differently" (p.87). Despite this, there are very few contemporary studies centred solely on unravelling the complexities of the female experience of the suicide process which might begin with depression and then escalate to suicidal ideation. The major debates surrounding suicide's causality in Japan oftentimes have excluded women entirely (ibid).

Hagihara et al. (2007), concerned over the internet's power to share information on 'how to successfully commit suicide', conducted a time-series analysis with data from 1987 to 2005. They reported finding a "positive correlation between general population male suicide rates in Japan and the prevalence of households using the Internet ($P < .05$)". Likewise, since the first 'internet suicide pact' was enacted in Japan in 2000 there has been significant interest in this phenomenon (Naito, 2007). The Waseda Institute under Ueda have conducted several studies that show that social media's interaction with public discourse on suicide is likely to be affecting the suicide rate, especially when the deceased is a celebrity, or the death is considered 'shocking' or 'unexpected' (Ueda et al, 2018, pp.19-29; Ueda et al., 2014, pp.623-629).

The Japanese phenomenon of hikikomori (people who shut themselves away from society) has also received a lot of attention from social psychologists for its common symptoms of "social withdrawal or isolation", "major depressive disorder", and "other mood disorders", which are often synonymous with heightened risk of suicidal ideation (Teo and Gaw, 2010, pp.445-446). A survey of Japanese workers (N=2019) by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2017) revealed that approximately one in four surveyed workers identified that they regularly experience suicidal ideation. This has been a point of national contention which continues to inspire academic papers on suicide's part in contributing to the death rate by '*karōshi'* (death by overwork)[1]. There are feminist elements to understanding the prevalence of *karōshi* in Japanese workplaces. For instance, Hori et al. (2019) find that women's generally lower 'social capital' in the workplace, limited access to promotions compared to their male colleagues, and the socioeconomic inequalities that come along with these, corresponded to an increased likelihood of experiencing suicidal ideation (pp.919-921).These findings also match many of the reasons given by Ueda et al. (2021) for identifying young women in precarious employment situations, female jobseekers, and 'financially vulnerable' women as among those most 'at risk'. An anthropological analysis of their social situations in the context of the climbing suicide rate is therefore much-needed.

[1] In addition to workplace suicides, *Karoshi* is also regularly noted as the 'cause of death' by coroners in cases such as organ failure from lack of sleep and proper nutrition, preventable workplace accidents, and road traffic accidents caused by exhausted drivers falling asleep at the wheel.

Aside from a few independent researchers and the small but dedicated team under Michiko Ueda at the Waseda Institute, who have been publishing papers and taking press conferences on the issue of suicide rates in Japan, recent academic output from universities has been lacking. This may be because Japan is a country subdividable into its many prefectures with their own suicide landscapes. Municipal governments with higher rates of suicide by population density have launched their own limited-scope studies as investigative reports with a view to informing local policy and suicide prevention initiatives.

Although none that I could find provided data on how the municipality's suicide landscape was changing due to the pandemic situation, Akita and Aomoris' reports held comments around pre-existing factors in localised suicide risk and suggested that these may be exacerbated by the current situation. Most notably, these prefectures have the oldest average age of residents, are relatively poorer than the rest of Japan, and have the highest suicide rates in Japan by prefecture. Therefore, their suicide, loneliness, and social isolation prevention strategies have traditionally revolved around providing resources to non-professional community members to create community support groups as a more economically feasible alternative to employing enough professional staff for 'point of need' care, or subsidising mental health services at hospitals. These community groups mainly cater to elderly residents. The reports do not believe it economically feasible to meet younger people's needs that are considered risk factors such as financial instability (combatable with a universal basic income or benefit schemes), or employment insecurity (combatable with investment into industry and public services to create more jobs) (Tanabe and Suzuki, 2019, pp.247-263).

In her co-edited book on mental healthcare in Japan (Taplin, 2012, pp.12-17), has suggested that "laws such as the Services and Support for Persons with Disabilities Act and the Mental Health Welfare and Medical Care Act" have passed the burden of support from national hands into prefectural government hands. In turn, "prefectural offices transfer part of their administrative jurisdictions to city, town and village offices such as for medical cost allowance systems and handling of applications for mental health welfare". This division of responsibility has created vastly different localised ways in which help-seeking behaviour

and mental help crises are responded to, making any attempt to write on the topic of suicide more broadly or with generalisable depictions of experiences extremely difficult (ibid). On a national level, she revealed tentative generalised findings with this in mind that positive experiences in Japanese society more broadly for people with known mental health conditions are relatively low compared to negative experiences, and symptoms are, at times, seen by patients to be worsened by their treatment by others once they are known to be mentally ill (Taplin, 2012, pp.25-26).

More recent literature on the suicide situation has tied in digital ethnography into the methodology following significant advocacy for its inclusion from the Waseda Institute under Michiko Ueda. Her team have been tracking suicide trends by demographic cohorts and attempting to find patterns or predictors in relation to contemporary events with the intention of advising policy measures as situations evolve (cf. Ueda, Mori, and Matsubayashi, 2014, pp.623-629; Ueda, Fahey, and Matsubayashi, 2018, pp.19-29; Ueda, Nordström, and Matsubayashi, 2021). Within this, they have pointed to online discourse and focussed recent policy advice on online content and suicide-related news and discussion (Ueda, 2021b).

In a similar vein, Ozawa De-Silva (2021) has emphasised the importance of the internet to the suicide rate situation both in how it can affect suicide rates, and in how it can grant instant access to large amounts of data on the suicide situation for professionals and researchers in the field of suicide prevention. She writes, “sentiments expressed by suicide website visitors about lack of meaning in life, loneliness, and the “difficulty of living” (*ikizurasa*) [has] a strong resonance in Japanese society far beyond the confines of suicide websites” (p.7). Overall, the main point made in her book is that the underlying issues pre-empting suicide attempts in Japan are far more complicated and diverse than simply depression. Rather suicide attempts are the end results of interconnected social factors, many of which she felt to have been exacerbated by the pandemic conditions.

The internet’s impact on suicide rates is particularly important to explore within the context of youth suicide. Ozawa De-Silva (2021, p.97) observed during her web-scraping that “a large number of visitors to suicide websites (most likely the majority) [were] young

individuals in their teens or twenties, and that many of them [fall] into the category of NEET". If online communities are where young people are discussing suicide, and the factors they feel are important in its likelihood, it makes sense to take this into consideration and employ online methods to add what is said online to the dataset of any contemporary overview of suicide in Japanese society. She cited social withdrawal and isolation in some suicidal individuals as a barrier to a number of voices being heard in prior studies, and had concerns that therefore specific issues faced by more isolated people might be underrepresented. She was also concerned that data she collected within a researcher-led, discursive setting might not be a true reflection of ideas and discourse shared between suicidal persons amongst themselves. While suicidal young people who are socially withdrawn and turn to the internet for support may be more difficult to recruit for discursive studies, the voices and viewpoints they post are still a reflection of what they were thinking about at the time of posting, and provide unique insights that might not come to light in discursive research settings. With feelings of loneliness associated with suicidality and social withdrawal a sign of depression, Ozawa De-Silva sets an example for modern scholars of suicide by acknowledging the difficulties people suffering from these might have in having their voices platformed in academic papers and finds those viewpoints where the cohort of interest situates them. Following this example, and to expand this study's available dataset which may be otherwise limited due to pandemic-related travel restrictions and costs, this study employs more emerging digital anthropology techniques, and includes analyses of vlogs created by the cohort of interest in which they talk at length about their situations, albeit in a performative rather than discursive context.

Within the medical field, Kitanaka (2012) has analysed narratives of patients diagnosed with major depressive disorder, of whom the majority had seriously considered suicide. Her overwhelming finding is that there is a belief commonly held by doctors and many seniors that depression was exceptionally rare in pre-modern Japan, and that the increase in rates of depression and other mental illnesses are either a product or symptom of the social zeitgeist of modern Japan. Many patients find that rather than receiving mental health care, support, and safeguarding, they are told to '*ganbaru*' (do their best) because they are simply victims of social and/or biological forces beyond personal, professional or caregiver control (ibid. pp.67-75). This, she argues, is a dangerous discourse when it pertains to questions of

accountability for suicide attempts, pointing to Japan's worryingly high rates of workplace suicides and other forms of *karōshi*: a company spokesperson for an inquest into a workplace suicide could use this discourse to point the finger of blame away from the company onto the deceased or societal factors, thus swerving liability and perceived need for internal change (ibid. pp. 54-60). She points also to the heightened struggles female patients seemed to have navigating a discourse around depression that seems so curiously fixated upon emphasising how men might suffer, leaving intersectional issues women with depression might have underrepresented in the discourse and, so far, under-researched (ibid. pp.129-150).

Informal motivations for the current study based upon previous work

This current study has always been intended to be a pilot for a larger study moving forward that might inform public policy decisions at a later date. The perspective I come at this work with is that "humanity", "compassion", and "understanding" should always come before academic coldness in the context of ethnographic studies into suicide. This is because these are the personal qualities an inspirational young Japanese woman I met during my activism, grew close to, and now deeply miss since her death by coronavirus after a suicide attempt had damaged her lungs said were the keys to understanding those within her cohort when they would say, almost as a catchphrase of a disenchanted female youth in modern Japan: "*Shinitai*. *Tsudzukitakunai.*" – "I want to die. I have no wish to continue [living]".

I recall a telephone conversation with her. She was breaking down at the thought of returning to a workplace in which she was underpaid, bullied, and made to feel like her life was worthless. "*Zannen nagara, watashi ha Nihonjin desu. Kono kimochi ha kawaranai*." - "As unfortunate as it is, I am Japanese. This feeling will not change".

I had met her while fighting together in the '*Kekkon no Jiyuu wo Subete no Hito ni*' ('Marriage Freedom for All People') movement. She was there with me in the protests outside of the Tokyo courthouses, fighting and yelling with the most beautiful anger for the

legalisation of same sex marriage in Japan. She inspired me to bring people together in the fight for women's and minorities' rights to dignity and a life worth living.

I admired her greatly and told her as much. In return, she spurned me for the admiration, saying it was wrong to admire a strength and resilience that women in her cohort should never have had to need in the first place; that if Japan were more compassionate and respectful of people like her, she would have liked to have pursued her dreams and aspirations unencumbered by socioeconomic hurdles and structural barriers.

Out of immense respect for her, I come at this writing with her views on the dangers of applauding struggling and/or suicidally ideating women's resilience and strength. It is already upon this dangerous platitude that justification for lack of social support or reason to follow up with someone to offer help in the wake of a survived attempt has been predicated. Japan's medical system focusses so much on survivorship of individual attempts that reach acute-care hospitals and emergency rooms that it so often fails to do anything to protect against future attempts which may result in admission to neither an acute care hospital, nor an emergency room, but instead, a transferral of a cadaver to a morgue (Ohbe et al., 2021, pp.233-236; Duignan, 2013; Hirayasu et al., 2009).

There are people like her who are struggling. Someone with merely the resilience and strength to survive against a backdrop of a society lacking supportive environments to live in does not have the same trajectory for recovery, nor resistance to attempts as someone who is heard; someone who is able to say what a life worth living looks like to them and be supported in seeing it become a reality.

If there was one thing that has hit me during my time hearing Japanese women's experiences, and my professional history with Japan, it is the humility of the dreams women would disclose to me, and their desperation to be heard about the injustices forming barriers to these dreams. I would be measuring them in a fitting space at the *shinise* kimono tailors I worked at, and these women, realising that I would take the time to simply listen, would progress from smalltalk, all business, to stories of pain and structural violence affecting them and their loved ones.

I would hazard that my positionality as a foreigner helped them assume that subjects which might be too generally 'culturally taboo' to talk about with other Japanese people could be spoken about with me. Add in that during my last extended stay in Japan, I was working in jobs more traditionally taken by women (especially service industry roles), which might have made me a little easier to relate to, and my ears were perfect for them to disclose their intimate realities to. And after those realities, with some prompting, I would hear their often-embarrassed imaginings of hope for a better, more beautiful world. It was these imaginings that they would share with each other as stories; visions of hope. Yet very few of these visions were set within their home country of Japan.

A young woman from the current study commented in a vlog entry on her desire for help with her recovery:

Vlogger - "From my experience, what others say does not count for anything. Friends, they never help you, right? They don't give us money. And I can never receive benefits, not even 1000 yen. Eventually, they say we have to survive by ourselves [...] But it is because they don't trust you in the first place. They do not expect you to do anything. Then they feel responsible [when you kill yourself], because they regard 'being alive' as being 'good' or 'just'. However, whether you live or not does not really matter. Both are the same. Simply 'being alive' is not as virtuous a pursuit as people may think. I'm actually glad [when I hear of a successful suicide attempt]. I feel like, 'they escaped the troubles of life by themself. Good for them'. That's just my opinion though. I believe whether you live or die, is just 'whatever'. Both have merits. Both have pros and cons. Life is not that beautiful".

I realised that the consequences of the lack of support for the social struggles these women had could be deadly when exacerbated by the new pandemic. Seeing a 'beautiful' life for themselves in Japan could become more difficult. When they would use the word for "I want to escape" as a euphemism for suicide, it could also be read literally. A past interviewee from a prior study on Japanese self-identified queer women said that many queer Japanese women were desperate to escape Japan due to the adversity they faced. This escape, she said, could be "with a visa or with a noose". Taking this metanymy, if the

former becomes impossible for someone in their social situation to hold, with lack of intervention to their desire to 'escape', a change to the status quo regarding support was now going to become more urgent and critical lest the 'escape' method turned to the latter – the noose.

My case is that lives can be saved if a non-self-destructive way forward to escape from adverse social situations can be seen. This pilot study is intended to reveal just what those social situations are through the testimonies of those who bear witness to them. There are people clearly asking for help. They are bearing their souls to the internet and to advocates and decrying the lack of help for people like them. They call us to act. As Foucault once said of his personal inspiration: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So, my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper and pessimistic activism" (Dreyfrus and Rabinow, 1983, p.263).

The case for the anthropological approach

From the outset of suicide studies becoming its own unique discipline in the West, Durkheim's (1897) argument that suicide is a product of society positioned it squarely within the realms of the social sciences. In Japan however, Durkheim's contemporaries largely "adopted the biological view of suicide", proposing instead "that it should be understood as a matter of a diseased brain or a genetic predisposition" (Kitanaka, 2012, p.107; cf. Kure, 1900, p.20; Miyake 1900, pp.6-9). Despite early academic thought in Japan following the line of biological determinism, Western scholars were starting to rebuke that. The structural functionalist models founded by Durkheim and then expanded by Parsons within the 'organic analogy' were placing the blame for vulnerability to suicidal ideation on societal conditions. Parsons (1937) and Durkheim (1897) viewed suicide as a malady of society. Conversely, many Japanese suicidologists viewed suicide as a malady of the self (Kitanaka, 2012, pp.107-108). Yojiro Motora is credited as having first brought Western ideas around psychology from America at the turn of the 19th Century (Sato and Sato, 2005, p.56). Much like in the West, the bulk of studies on suicide treated it as a psychiatric or psychological

issue. However, there was a notable shift in the discourse following World War 2 when suicide rates jumped from “less than 15 [per 100,000] during the war, to 25.3 in 1955”. It was at this point that sociologists started to make the case that rather than there simply being a 69% higher suicide rate because of an explosion of cases of individual ‘maladies of the self’, there must be macro-level factors at play. Thus, proponents of Durkheim in Japan came to make his theories more mainstream by linking the high suicide rates especially among Japan’s *Showa* era (1926-1989AD) youth with the idea that they were affected by *anomie* (Iga and Ohara, 1967, pp.59-60).

In the West, certain proponents such as Kraeperlin favoured the biological approach. Despite the influence of Freud and his disciples in creating discourses around psychodynamics which often clashed with Kraeperlin’s ideas around biological determinism, this argument has seen use both inside and outside of Japanese suicidology and psychiatry throughout the Taishō (1912-1926AD), Shōwa (1926-1989AD), and Heisei (1989-2019AD) periods in modern Japanese history (Shepherd, 1995, pp.174-183).

Japanese psychiatry splits the argument into two camps. Both are at odds with the psychodynamic explanations for the determinants of an individual’s disposition to performing certain actions within a society including actions which are self-destructive. These are ‘*seibutsuteki keiteiron*’ (biology-related determinism), and ‘*denshi keiteiron*’ (genetic determinism) (Yamaguchi, 2001, pp.89-101). The difference is subtle but important. While the former is simply blind to, or dismissive of, social explanations for psychological conditions, the latter has a more political nuance. The argument in favour of ‘*denshi keiteiron’* says that if it can be proven that certain genetics determine one’s propensity to succeed in society, or inversely to avoid behaviours which are adverse to one’s ability to thrive in society (including self-destructive behaviours), surely medicalised solutions will be more effective for reducing self-destructive behaviours within a population than sociological interventions in the suicide process for individuals. Social attitudes are largely against over-medicalising the treatment of suicide for ethical reasons such as concerns for the quality of life of the suicidal individual (Tsuchiya et al., 2008, pp.50-54).

The perspective that this anthropological approach takes to suicide is to disregard the pursuit of biological explanations as these are outside of this study's scope, while acknowledging that this is still a very prevalent part of medical discourse (Kitanaka, 2012, pp.106-108), and instead to listen to stakeholders in the suicide process involved in intervention and advocacy as well as the suicidal individuals themselves. This approach seeks to understand what they believe to be the most pressing issues for suicidal individuals, while acknowledging and embracing the idea that suicide can very much be conceptualised in culturally-bound ideas.

For instance, Widger's (2014) interviews with community members close to people who have died by suicide in Madampe, Sri Lanka, revealed that "deficit", or occasionally "abundance" of '*metta*' (a Sinhala term meaning "loving kindness and compassion") is often blamed for a suicide after the fact due to the culturally bound ideas placed on it. His study of the decades-old epidemic of suicides by self-poisoning revealed that the taking of poison in itself holds inherent cultural significance for many Sri Lankans. Increased accessibility of poisons in the form of more lethal pesticides becoming legalised on a national level therefore resulted in increased deaths. Policy decisions aimed at suicide prevention were therefore especially effective when targeting these lethal means that held specific culturally bound meanings, to make them less accessible. Therefore, by taking an approach which puts the meanings individuals placed on not just suicide, but its means and social context, a more empathetic and localised understanding of suicidal and otherwise self-destructive behaviours can be explored by medical anthropologists than by more scientific, medicalised or biological approaches, though each of the latter surely have their place in other literature.

A Brief Note on Psychological Terms

For the sake of addressing the differences in definitions of certain important psychological terms used in the body of this work, I will be working under the assumption that although there will be significant overlap, understandings and meanings created by people around such complex and personally affecting terms as 'suicide', 'suicidal ideation', and 'depression'

will no doubt differ in self-conceptualisation and self-definition between persons. The aim of this paper is not to erroneously misattribute a homogeneous definition of what 'suicide', 'suicidal ideation', or 'depression' mean to the 'Japanese mind' and attribute it to all persons within the studied demographic, but to highlight that these conceptualisations and definitions are inherently deeply personal products of existing as individuals with unique collections of experiences in Japanese society.

Aims and research questions

This study asks how a sudden transformation in Japanese society caused by the Covid-19 pandemic may have translated into rising suicide rates among young women, and what underlying social maladies may have been exacerbated in light of the pandemic such that young women's mental health outcomes have worsened. The research asked the following questions:

-What are the commonalities in social circumstances in the groups identified as most 'at-risk' of suicide by the Waseda Institute, and why were the most 'at risk' groups all young women (Ueda, 2021a; Ueda, 2021b)?

-What recommendations for interventions to the rising suicide rate among young women are being made by those who are witnessing the issues first hand and/or are involved in advocacy for young women in Japan?

-What nuanced understanding of feminist issues is missing from the current academic discourse on suicide in Japan?

-Through an anthropological lens, what other social factors are affecting popular ways of considering what 'a life worth living' means in the Japanese context? How attainable is a 'life worth living' in modern Japan, and what are the implications to those who consider this 'life worth living' unattainable for themselves in the context of a rising female suicide rate?

Methodology

This study's data consists of two distinct components combined for analysis. Both are contemporary to each other in as much as it is possible for them to be so. Although both were produced and presented as original datasets for this paper, one is compiled from N=23 interviews produced for the purposes of this study and therefore only viewpoints expressed in 2022 (the fourth year of Reiwa by the Japanese calendar) are represented. The other is compiled from web scraping already-existing cultural objects in the form of vlogs produced as recently as it was possible to find on publicly-available platforms.

The web-scraped dataset is a product of analysing vlogs created by Japanese women wherein they freely talk about their experiences of suicidal ideation and whatever else comes to mind while their minds are on the subject. The sample size for this data set is N=28 transcripts of vlogs from different users, in addition to an equal number of English translations of the same transcripts. In order to increase the relevance of the vlogs to the study, the selection criteria were that the vlogs were recorded since the female suicide rate started to rise in 2019, and that the vlogger self-identified that she had experiences of suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts either in the vlog and/or its description. These vlogs were accessed from publicly available online sources, particularly Youtube and Twitter, both of which are popular among young adults in Japan. As anonymity is an obvious concern with publicly available online sources, rather than including citations or links that lead to the videos in a bibliography, anonymised translations of transcripts prepared from the videos are presented as an original dataset instead. As with the interview data, potentially-identifying information has been omitted. The vlogs were found initially by searching with relevant search terms on Youtube and Twitter in Japanese. Due to their status as 'vulnerable adults', the vloggers themselves have not been contacted, nor have any users who have engaged with the posts as commenters. The hope is that by treating these recordings as anonymous case studies, a more intimate anthropological examination of the suicide situation can be performed than if only the views of people who have never experienced suicidal ideation were included. The contribution that this side of the study makes is to give

a window into the lives of young women in Japan, using the way(s) in which they wish to present themselves and the issues they face through the medium of online vlogs.

Ethics guidelines for electronic resources and data scraping online platforms are still emerging, but precedents do exist for use of publicly-available media 'authored' by online creators which anthropologists may wish to study. The guidelines followed in this study are consistent with those outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (2002, p.10), and Elgesem (2002, pp.185-193) which stipulate that "only minimal risk of harm" should be inherent to the study, "the integrity and the autonomy [of] research subjects [are] adequately secured", the methodology is consistent in its treatment of all content authors, and that "knowledge produced is relevant" to the study.

The second dataset was created by interviewing people in advocacy groups about what they believe to be behind the recent surge in the young female suicide rate and what life in general looks like for young women in modern Japan. The ethics-approved question list can be found in the appendix at the end of this paper[2]. The interview portion of the study took a qualitative, multi-methods approach (Bryman, 2012) centred around collecting data from interviews with organisations directly involved in advocating for improvements in the social situation of people in groups most heavily encountering suicide rate increases, and professionals with knowledge on the societal, legal and political frameworks of modern Japan, as they relate to these same groups.

The selection criteria for interviewees were that they both work or volunteer for causes whose objectives align with understanding and bettering the social situation for women, and that the point of contact for the group was willing to put them forward as an appropriate interviewee. Interviews were conducted in Japanese or English, as appropriate, and recorded. The interviews cited in this thesis which were conducted in Japanese have

[2] Having said this, with all the intent I might have had to follow the appropriate question list for the interviewees' preferred language, the interviewees almost universally reacted fairly poorly to them, and asked me instead to let them talk about what was important to them, or as one put it in casual Japanese slang, "*ne, damatte ii yo"* ("you know, shutting up is good"). When saying this, her voice became reproachful; her face annoyed, before softening and saying, *"daijobu, kiku dake de ii*" ("it's alright, just listen and you are good").

been translated into English. My gratitude must go to the Japanese NPO 'Voiceup Japan', whose unwavering dedication to women's rights and welfare causes have led them to assist the study both in providing interviewees, and in acting as a starting point for a 'snowball approach' to further interviewee recruitment. Separately to this, more recruitment was also made possible by 'cold-emailing' other relevant organisations.

Once both datasets were collected, the transcripts underwent thematic analysis. From especially the experiential orientation thematic analysis lends itself to, transcripts were analysed and the points narrowed down to reflect the "perspectival reality of a particular participant" at the point of recording or interview (Terry et al., 2017, p.19). "The aim of thematic analysis is not simply to summarise the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question", but in such a way that the research question's remit "can evolve throughout coding and theme development" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.887). Although the research questions were set at the beginning of the study, it was important that the paper produced a useful and meaningful addition to the discourse which reflected the interests of study participants and the studied cohort in question. Therefore, thematic analysis seemed appropriate as a methodology that could evolve in such a way as that themes that emerged as a result of the research and were felt meaningful by the participants and vloggers could be properly coded and integrated into the paper as extensions of the initial research questions due to its "flexibility in approaches to meaning generation". In order to reduce researcher bias when deciding on thematic categorisation, themes to look out for which would later guide the contents of the chapters were largely those I was directed towards by the interviewees themselves.

The data has been coded both semantically (for explicit meaning), and latently (for implied meaning), but in the latter case especially where implications speak to wider issues which are explicitly expressed by informants and the cohort in their vlogs or are relevant to matters of particular note in the modern academic discourse about suicide and its known or highly suspected and evidenced factors. With it, findings could be adapted to spotlight social maladies and barriers to support that were specifically emphasised by the participants and

cohort in their testimonies by “identify[ing] patterns within and across data in relation to participants’ lived experience” (Braun, and Clarke, 2017, p.298).

Coding was performed in a 6-stage process as per Terry et al. (2017, pp.23-32).

Step one was familiarising with the data and reducing it down to that which particularly related to the research questions. Vlog data was collected before the interview data, and step one (familiarising with the data) was performed on these before the interview data was collected. These were treated as performative cultural artefacts authored to be viewed visually as well as textually. It was during this stage that it was decided that the analysis would benefit from the inclusion of a visual analysis aspect going forward in order to be able to code for themes that were made more apparent in a more visual way or were more visually than discursively communicated in the recordings. Therefore, consent for the video calls to be analysed for visual as well as discursive data was able to be sought from the interview participants before each interview. A small minority of participants (three) still opted for voice only calls and kept their cameras turned off throughout. A further one participant apologised that she did not have a camera on her laptop to switch on for the interview.

Step two was generating codes by analysing the transcripts and videos for meaning (including wider social meaning) in their respective specific contexts and with special regard to sections that more directly answer the research questions.

Step three consisted of constructing themes by collating the codes into potential themes in a process of “pattern formation and identification” (ibid, p.27).

Step four was reviewing potential themes which included grouping smaller themes as subcategories of larger themes predominantly guided by the what the interviewees believed to be the most important themes to look for in the dataset, while leaving space for the researcher’s own interpretations of meanings given the wider social context of the issue and his own further reading on this context. Specifically, contemporary scholars such as Kitanaka (2012), Ueda (2021a, 2021b), and Ozawa De-Silva (2021) have highlighted certain themes

that have emerged from their research and recommended they be explored more in-depth in further research into the area. Where data was present that could enhance understanding of these themes and provide valuable additions to the discourse, the themes were shortlisted for inclusion as sub-themes within chapters.

Step five was to name the themes and then define them in relation to the various meanings created around them and the academic discourse in a more "interpretative orientation". Using these themes, a narrative "based on, and about, the data, that makes sense of the patterning and diversity of meaning" was generated (Terry et al. 2017, p.31).

Step six was producing the report. This was a process of coming from "a 'purely' analytic point in the research process, […] to the bigger picture of the overall project" (ibid, p.32). Sections of transcripts and visual observations were collated them to form cogent collections of points for chapters discussing findings, and written in relation to relevant literature. As this research was undertaken over a one-year timeframe, and concerned a complex and evolving issue, a consideration was that notable events in the political, societal, and suicide landscapes were likely to occur during its course. This certainly seemed to transpire to be the case, and these events including high-profile celebrity suicides, implementations of measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and surges in the number of people requiring suicide prevention support citing particular reasons, changed the direction some of the interviews took. Descriptions of these events were included within appropriate chapters for their discussion, as they contextualised the modern, evolving suicide discourse, and influenced the considerations of the interviewees at their respective times of interview.

Given that the people sharing their perspectives on suicide in modern Japan were video calling or using a camera to record themselves giving a visual perspective of their lives as well, themes were also able to be derived from visual analysis, though this analysis was limited in scope to what the informants and vloggers chose to have their cameras pointed at. The contents of the datasets were not just analysed for what was said, but also what could be observed.

The vlogs all appeared to have been recorded in the women's homes or places where they were staying while between addresses. These included two vloggers who recorded in private booths in manga cafés which offer '*naito pakku'* ('night pack') deals where one can sleep in a chair or on the floor of the booth overnight, and cheap prices to book a booth to essentially lodge in for a week. One series was recorded in love hotels paid for by male clients of a vlogger in the sex industry once she had finished her work and had the rooms to herself to reflect on her life.

Given the topic's sensitivities, and that "ethical and methodological aspects" of any study "are deeply entwined" (Trombeta and Cox 2022, p.1560), much thought was given as to how to fully transpose the individuals' views as they themselves presented them through the two mediums of self-produced videos and video interviews into an academic paper without omitting anything they wanted to communicate. These forms of communication were both visual and verbal/textual, so a visual-verbal video analysis was appropriate. "Visual research methods are characterised by the use of visual materials, such as still or moving images as a method to generate data related to a research question" (ibid, p.1567).

In this study, the vloggers and some interviewees would sometimes visually illustrate the points they were making. Sometimes this was in a more active way, in that they would search for things on their phones or in their surroundings to show to the camera or, as was very common with the vloggers, points were made in a more passive way. Many vloggers were very candid about their living and social situations and did not hide their surroundings. Many also passively gestured to show certain unpleasantries in the shot, or conducted informational tours of their living situations in 'a day in my life', or 'my morning/evening routine' videos, often without cleaning beforehand.

The integration of coding visual analysis has been felt important to mixed-methods scholars as its omission can be a hinderance to research subjects being 'active subjects' in knowledge production. If they themselves present ideas in both verbal and visual ways, the data collection process should account for that (Glaw et al., 2017, pp.2-3). To this end, scholars utilising visual media produced by groups of interest have come to the conclusion that doing so can be "more relevant and respectful of the integrity of the groups". Even if they may

struggle at times to “cognitively express their views”, visual media can “capture the lived experience of participants, especially in relation to the difficulties of feeling socially unacceptable when suffering from a long-term mental illness”. In this way, participants are ‘active subjects’, “photographers and authors of their own narratives” which can then be analysed (ibid).

There have already been a number of successful studies pertaining to the lived experiences of people with mental health conditions which have heavily integrated self-produced visual media into datasets for analysis. Erdner et al.’s (2009, pp.54-60) study on views of life among people with long-term mental health conditions integrated visual materials including photographs and videos produced by their cohort of interest. They found that doing so removed many of the barriers to accessing the views of people with agoraphobia, social anxiety, limited cognitive function, and difficulties articulating what they might want to say. Rather than opting not to include these participants and producing a study more biased towards presenting the views of participants who had no difficulty meeting with them and conducting a coherent interview, Erdner et al.’s mixed-methods approach, which also analysed materials communicated to them visually, allowed them to understand the views and social circumstances of a much broader range of participants. In a similar vein, this study’s mixed-methods approach has allowed it to integrate the views of agoraphobic vloggers, those who state they are socially anxious, and people with verbal difficulties due to injuries from past suicide attempts[3], whose circumstances and views might not otherwise have been adequately reflected in past studies compared to their peers who do not have such difficulties being reached by researchers.

This study was concerned with discourses surrounding suicide and how these ideas are communicated. To this end, the ways suicide survivors have represented themselves had to be scrutinised at more than face value while acknowledging the vlog format as one in which the studied cohort can “create personal narratives, opening their everyday realities,

[3] Verbal difficulties are more common in suicide attempt survivors in modern Japan due to its higher rates of suicide attempts using hydrogen sulphide gas produced with methods from viral information on internet message boards and forums tracing back to 2008. Surviving a suicide attempt with hydrogen sulphide gas carries a high risk of severe bronchial and tracheal injuries (Morii et al., 2010, pp.1-3; Ruder et al., 2015, pp.23-25).

challenges and struggles to public view and sometimes document emotional experiences related to physical or mental illnesses" (Fazeli, Sabetti, and Ferrari, 2023). It is one which, as 'digital stories' digital ethnographers have claimed their production can support emotional growth and help individuals "…come to terms with disgrace around sensitive personal issues and marginalisation while providing hope and encouragement to others" (Ferrari et al., 2022, p.8).

Hendry's (2019, pp.54, 226) primary concern for methodological interpretation among Japanese medical anthropologists, which has been echoed by Kitanaka (2012, p.106) and Berman and Rizzo (2021, pp.67-68) among others has been that findings should not be undermined in their integrity and certainty by the socio-cultural factor of '*tatemae'*. *Tatemae* refers to an almost-façade and is 'the face one shows to the world', as opposed to '*honne'*, one's honest views, opinions and feelings. *Tatemae's* socio-cultural effect on self-representation means that one must scrutinise these self-representations and be aware of the diminishing filter *tatemae* might present. The fuller picture that came with observing the studied group in their living situations gave greater opportunity to look for *tatemae* façades and ways in which these people might change the ways they represent their situations to show a more 'socially acceptable' version. As it was, the use of visual representations where vloggers gave extensive, honest tours of their living situations and often visceral descriptions of physical, social, and mental suffering cast much doubt on any idea that *tatemae* had had much discernible effect on the vloggers' self-representations, though without the visual analysis element of the methodology, this would have been more difficult to say, and reduced certainty of whether the findings accurately reflected the vloggers' true feelings, unimpeded by socially influenced self-censor or filter.

This mixed-methods study incorporating analyses of textual, verbal, and visual information was loosely based upon digital ethnographic methods used in a similar contemporary study conducted by Ozawa De-Silva (2021, pp.27-30, 34-37) which incorporated analyses of internet users' self-authored representations of lived experiences of seriously considering suicide as a reaction to extreme feelings of loneliness using a digital ethnographic approach, alongside interviews with stakeholders in the suicide process. Ozawa De-Silva's area of focus was how feelings of loneliness in Japanese society can contribute to depression rates and

ultimately suicidal intent, with special consideration to loneliness's effect on young people. This made accessing the people to whom her study especially pertained – those withdrawn from society – especially difficult. She found that accessing the websites they created content on was a way to better understand their thoughts about their lives, and the discourses they were creating. By analysing these as cultural artefacts alongside her interview data, she was able to form a cogent picture of loneliness in Japan. Leaning heavily on her methodology, but within a tighter visual-verbal video analysis framework integrated into a thematic analysis model, this study of lived experiences of Japanese women considering suicide in contemporary Japan has aimed to achieve a similar outcome for its own cohort of interest.

The decision to analyse the vloggers' 'digital stories' within a visual-verbal video analysis framework was an acknowledgement that individuals in an interview or vlog share information by using not only language, but also gestures, facial expressions, motions, the showing of items and images, and aspects of the environments they record or answer calls for video interviews in (Goodwin, 2013; Hall, 1999; Ramey et al., 2016). This framework gives "social science and medical researchers a new perspective for managing video data analysis more efficiently, while fully exploiting the information embedded in these data. Based on multimodality and visual grounded theories, visual-verbal video analysis is a multilayered, qualitative approach to content analysis featuring a structured, detailed, analytical process" (Fazeli, Sabetti, and Ferrari, 2023).

The visual-verbal video analysis framework used in this study had its own parallel six-step process when integrated into thematic analysis' original six-step process, as per Ramey et al. (2016).

In the first step (familiarising with the data), the videos and recordings were watched several times, focusing separately on the spoken or written words, the setting, facial expressions, motions and gestures, items in the shot, and camera angles respectively (Fazeli, Sabetti, and Ferrari, 2023).

Step two (generating codes) was adapted into a process of transcribing and translating the text and then annotating the transcriptions with notes from the visual elements regarding "content, messages, emotions, discourses, etc." (ibid).

Step three (constructing themes) also meant deciding whether to use videos in their entirety or break them down into smaller segments. As the interviews and vlogs covered a wide range of topics, the latter was chosen in all cases, with each relevant segment and its annotations categorised under each theme heading.

Step four (reviewing potential themes) integrated the extraction and coding of video data into the matrices of: general characteristics; multimodal characteristics; visual characteristics; characteristics of the interviewee/vlogger; and the visual elements identified in step two.

In step five (naming and defining themes), coded data was grouped, categorised, sub-categorised, and abstracted so that verbal, textual, and visual components and characteristics were defined, their connections to each other made clear, and finally identified using themes and sub-themes related to the research questions.

Step six (producing the report) was conducted using the themes identified in the prior steps, with notes from the visual analysis also integrated into the report where appropriate. At this stage, and where also appropriate, visual depictions such as in figure 2 (a depiction of a fictional psychosomatic condition shared by an interviewee during an interview, p.81) could be integrated into the report. To preserve anonymity, a decision was made to omit images directly taken from vlogs and interviews, as almost all shots had the vloggers, interviewees, or their offices or living situations, depicted in the frame and could have led to the interviewees or vloggers becoming identifiable, contrary to ethics guidelines.

A note on sources

This paper is constructed predominantly of ideas my informants requested be included in this study. While I have attempted to order these ideas logically, based on the themes

emerging from coding the transcript data, this paper's primary strength is that its contents predominantly reflect the discourses and ideas around women's experiences of Japanese society as seen from the viewpoints of advocates with direct experience. They are flavoured by the kinds of interactions they have, and the kinds of people these advocates have interacted with. These analyses contribute to the discourse through sources that western scholars might not normally have access to. They have been considered in light of literature published in Japanese journals published in Japanese and, where there are parallels with Western discourse, Western sources too have been cited to add to the analysis.

As this is a culturally-bound study of an issue affecting more than just Japan but encased within a Japanese zeitgeist, I felt it more appropriate to analyse the data concerning the Japanese context within a literature framework created by Japanese scholars, while nodding to theory which may be transferrable from other contexts. I especially wanted to avoid having Japanese concepts represented (or misrepresented) through a filter of Western scholarly interpretation as much as possible. These interpretations may be affected by a kind of "orientalism" and "mysticism" Said (1979, pp.19-20) warned against, founded upon epistemological and ontological distancing and differencing of 'the other' in 'the Orient' by Western scholars in 'the Occident'. I actively write, cognizant of the argument that it is much more directly representative and culturally appropriate to have voices from a culture establish the representations and ideas about that culture.

The information and viewpoints I have encountered as part of this study may have been subject to skewing by overrepresentation of those with the economic capital to have the free time and access to technology to create vlogs, take video interviews, and publish materials from academic institutions with often very high fees. This is compounded by an underrepresentation of those living in places less connected to advocacy and support networks, or who did not have the resources or leisure time to properly seek advocacy or other help from groups that would be interviewed as part of this study. Therefore, please consider the findings of this paper limited to being indicative of only the experiences of people who have the resources to seek other resources or journal their experiences online. I suspect from my interactions with impoverished communities in Japan prior to this study

that there remains a silent suffering within the marginalised and unrepresented which this study cannot even begin to pretend to understand.

Grouping the vloggers' testimonies

There was a great deal of overlap in what the women talked about, but regarding their intentions when recording the vlogs, the vloggers can be roughly split into three groups. There were two groups that vlogged with the intention of educating the viewers. The first of these groups (hereafter referred to as group 'V1') sought primarily to educate people directly about what depression and suicidal ideation felt like to experience. They talked about their emotions, what typical and/or bad days look like for them, and how their symptoms affect their lives. With depression being a common comorbidity with suicidal ideation (Chakravarthy et al., 2014, p.214), many of the vloggers decided to explain their symptoms of both in some depth, which included many accounts with an emotional vulnerability and frankness which might otherwise be considered to be transgressive outside of the virtual world (Kordzińska-Nawrocka, 2009, p.250). This group contains N=13 testimonies.

The second group (hereafter referred to as 'V2') talked directly about social circumstances which make life difficult and tended to focus on issues directly affecting their cohort. Themes of paradox between perceived societal expectations of their cohort and the reality of what is attainable were highly prevalent, qualifying this subset of the dataset for their own category. This category has been especially revealing in terms of the anthropological context. Its members speak of wider societal issues which contribute to feelings of hopelessness. This group contains N=8 testimonies.

The third group (hereafter referred to as 'V3') seemed to be more interested in self-memorialisation. They expressed that their primary objective was to create something lasting online that showed that they existed once they had passed. Many also said that if they create an online personality for themselves, it would be more difficult to attempt or reattempt to die by suicide because there would be 'more' of themselves – their existence was 'more substantial' for having an online presence. Also, there seemed to be a certain

preoccupation with wanting the commenters to tell them to ‘stay alive’, ‘do their best’, and ‘live to make more content’. This last group seemed significantly more hopeful than fatalistic. I would summarise the sentiment of this third group as being primarily ‘I am/was here’, and ‘I should matter’. This group contains N=7 testimonies.

The reason for the unequal groupings is that they are the result of random sampling from suicide-related search queries. Due to ethical reasons of anonymity and protecting the identity of these vloggers from being discovered, the exact terms are omitted from this paper.

Thematic analysis revealed that what was important for the vloggers in their personal understandings of suicide did not match with what was important for their advocates, though there was a lot of overlap. From coding the data, I extracted themes, which the contents of the following chapters reflect. Although as a writer, my voice in the translation and selection of the cited excerpts is unavoidable, I have centred the contents of this paper around the words and views of the people represented in the datasets.

Further ethical considerations

Specific considerations have been made regarding research ethics. Firstly, following Chu et al.s’ (2009) recommendations, the viewpoints of the people who are directly affected by a medical issue (in this case suicidal ideation) should be taken into account using their own words wherever possible when discussing it so that their lives are accurately and respectfully represented. By nature of the selection criteria, the vloggers can be defined as ‘vulnerable adults’. Because of this, I did not interact with them directly either as interviewees or by contacting content creators online. As a way of removing the risk of harm from direct interaction while still including their views in the dataset, their words, recorded independently in vlogs, are being read as a ‘cultural product’ rather than being taken from live interviews. While I acknowledge that if a disclosure of suicidal intent by an interview participant during a live interview would oblige me to end the interview and refer them to professionals, these are not live interviews, and interference in the vloggers’ lives would be uncalled for. For the purposes of compiling this dataset, the vloggers posting on publicly

available platforms “may be understood as authors intending for their work to be public” (Association of Internet Researchers, 2002, p.7). This means that it is reasonable to work under the assumption that they expect their work to be freely read by other internet users.

Secondly, my positionality must be considered as the studied group differ in gender and nationality to myself. I recognise that I am a British man studying the social situation and discourse around women’s lives in Japanese society. I have a history of advocacy through co-founding a student-led, registered charity organisation in Japan, which advocates for women and minorities. To minimise or mitigate the potential mental health impact of being interviewed by a British man about sensitive issues for Japanese women, the organisations themselves were asked to select interview participants who are unlikely to be significantly affected by the interview. Interviewees were fully debriefed after the interview, and encouraged to seek further help and support if necessary. The information pertaining to help and support was supplied in both English and Japanese.

By asking the organisations to select appropriate interview participants, ‘survivor-advocates’ (ie. those who have survived suicide attempts and now feel called to advocate for people at risk of suicide) were excluded from the potential interviewee pool. Likewise, given that they may be suicide attempt survivors, the vloggers were not contacted for an interview.

Thirdly, the dataset created using the vlogs needed to be completely anonymous. Selected quotes from the transcripts were used once translated. Transcripts were not made available in either language online. As the only copies of the transcripts were created and presented as my own data for this study, there is little risk that the vlogs would be searchable from any information presented. No identifying information about the vlog creators aside from stating that the selection criteria for inclusion in the dataset is that they are adult women who self-identify either in the vlog itself or its description that they have experienced suicidal ideation or have attempted suicide is included. In order to prevent anonymity being compromised, no usernames, real names, links to videos, or specific search terms are included in this dataset.

Fourthly, I considered that the interviewees in their roles within the advocacy groups will likely have been used to talking about hard-hitting issues within their professional and/or voluntary capacities. Nonetheless, they were encouraged to ask to take a break or pause/stop the interview if they felt that this would be the best course of action with respect to their continued positive mental wellbeing. Signposting information for support was listed on the debriefing sheet and participant information sheet.

Lastly, I must accept that I was interviewing about sensitive topics in my non-native language and consider my ability to support the participants. However, I am fluent in Japanese, having spent much of my professional and academic life in Japan. I am also a graduate of the Japanese studies programme at Meiji Gakuin University (明治学院大学) in Japan, and have historically already published and presented on my own ethnographic research on minorities in the country in Japanese. Therefore, I felt confident that my ability to support participants in Japanese was equivalent to my ability to support them in my native English.

A note on the context of the pandemic

This study has been undertaken at a point in which Japan's cultural framework has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several 'states of emergency' have been called by the national government, businesses have had to adapt to new restrictions and internal policies, an already overstretched system for allocating childcare places has been stretched, and the medical system has become more burdened with COVID-19 cases. Japan boasts high vaccine uptake, and media reports from anti-vaccination campaigns have been largely quashed (Pratt and Carr, 2022). However, many respondents and vloggers within this study's dataset felt that the constant underlying threat of COVID-19 had implications regarding conceptualising one's own self-worth and mortality. A vlogger in the V1 group said, "I do '*shuukatsu*'[4] even though my depression is my enemy. Isn't it strange? I am paranoid. I know I will get coronavirus if I go. It is busy and it is expected you stand around other people or do on-the-spot interviews with people around. There are even more now because the

[4] A cultural practice of intense job-hunting, largely through attending busy career fairs. This is a time-limited annual event for job-seekers in which many companies do the bulk of their recruitment.

pandemic has made jobs vanish. Surely someone there has coronavirus already but they need a job; need the money, and they come. I want to die so why am I scared? Why am I scared? I wonder. I will not go to try to be safe, and then buy a rope and learn to tie it. Does suicide have its own meaning to me? Is it because it's the only thing I am allowed to decide by myself".

Another in the V2 group who already works for a company said, "The company does not value my life so why should I? I am a receptionist and I am given a mask but customers come right up to my face with no mask even if I say no. I back away and they keep coming toward me like the virus is controlling them. I have already had the virus twice and the company kept me in the dorm with someone who was not sick. It was a small room and she later got very sick. My body, my health, my life is not of value. My manager was angry because I made my co-worker sick. I made her sick? [laughs] My fault? [laughs in a not-quite-sane way] You are the one at fault you know. And then he demanded I come back to work although it would make everybody else sick. They tell you not to wear masks, you know. 'Because the customers want to see your pretty face'. Get fucked, bastard. Compared to my 'pretty face', my life is worth less"? With this, she drank from a bottle of Suntory whiskey before concluding, "but then maybe it is. Maybe I should overdose so that my 'pretty face' is still pretty in a grave".

The socioeconomic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic having resulted in a change in the circumstances of people considering suicide seems one side of the issue that requires a contemporary study of the suicide rate situation within this new social zeitgeist. Its threat to life and health requires researchers to revaluate concepts regarding mortality accounting for the presence of a deadly unseen virus. The 'real world' is one in which one may catch the virus while the online world is one in which one is safe. In all, this precipitates a study that touches on new, evolving ideas around death, self-determinism as it pertains to how one would choose to die, and what life looks like in the Japanese landscape as Japan adapts to its newfound threat and attempts to overcome it.

The online landscape too is changing as people react to the new pandemic conditions and provide support to each other. The internet can be argued as a space one might come for

'human interaction' that does not put one at risk of contracting the virus. With this study traversing both online and real-world landscapes of discourse in an evolving Japan, the originality and contribution this study aims to make cannot be understated. It is further hoped that with intersectional research papers on women's positions in the suicide landscape few and far between, this study will make important contributions to a wider understanding of women's mental health for suicidologists more broadly.

Coding the Discourse

> "The attempt at 13 became part of a *personal* legacy: "There was always this sense of unfinished business. Because I'd tried when I was younger it had become an option as a young adult". Every suicide attempt harbours the ultimate threat that, unless underlying problems can be resolved, a fatal suicide attempt will follow" (Hill, 1995, p.33).
>
> - Kate Hill, writing following her brother's death by suicide at age 20

On the epistemological benefits of qualitative work

In her own study on suicide among young people, Hill (1995, p.5) made the point that "statistics may all too easily engulf their subjects", leading her to adopt an epistemological approach more in line with listening to the people behind the statistics. After all, epistemologically, the validity of any positivistic claim made using quantitative datasets wherein the cumulative individual data involved has confounding variables is deeply flawed. It also leaves the data open to interpretations which might differ from the intent of the speakers. It is for this reason though that for the sake of thoroughness of academic practice I present the quantitative data produced by coding each of the datasets. I will leave deeper qualitative analysis for later chapters, in which a more full and cogent argument can be made using longer excerpts from the transcripts, and ergo the informants' own words.

Please treat this as an exposé of the data as there are a few points that particularly surprised me in these findings. The inherent differences in the contents and contexts of each of the datasets' creations must be acknowledged. The contents of the vlogs should be read with the acknowledgement that they have been produced as content for their viewership and are performative in nature to an imagined audience. Many of the vloggers left comment responses to their audience, and many commenters wrote about having similar or shared experiences with similar issues as were brought up in the videos. When they did, their future video content sometimes acknowledged their previous audience interaction and therefore was affected by these interactions. In contrast, the interviews were dialogic in nature, which may have skewed what was said in other ways. Interviewees may have been guided by my questions, considered my own wellbeing when choosing what topics to omit or include in our discussions, have had their own socio-political agendas, or any number of obfuscating factors affecting what was said. The fatalism felt by the vloggers might have helped them to be more open in the way one vlogger from group V1 said: "I am dead already. I can tell the truth. There's no meaning in lying". At the same time, I did not expect to see so much of a difference between the themes raised in interviews about the social context of the suicide outbreak and the self-identified subjects of that outbreak. With both of these different insights from different vantage points, I hope that a fuller picture of the situation will be revealed in a way which contributes to the literature on suicide as continuing social phenomenon.

Brief notes on the data:

Tables 1 and 2, and Figure 1 below all represent the same data. Table 1 represents how many times I either saw, read in the videos[5] or the video descriptions, or heard mention of, the below themes. Most of these themes were selected based upon which topics had the highest frequency of being mentioned. The exceptions included 'grief', due to its relatively low rate of being mentioned. I thought it was note-worthy that not a single interviewee

[5] In two of the vlogs, the women had lost their ability to speak effectively due to injuries from previous suicide attempts so had captioned their videos.

mentioned this, so felt it should be included. Its absence from the conversation from the advocates' side might speak more about how conversations about death, grief, and suicide are tackled (or more accurately, avoided) in wider Japanese society.

'Injuries from previous suicide attempts' also, presented themselves in unavoidable ways, especially with the two survivors of suicide attempts using H_2S having to subtitle or create simple segments featuring text over music due to the self-inflicted damage to their respiratory systems. I thought this serious enough to receive its own category. I noted that the main complaint from the four relevant people was not about physical difficulties they experienced, but about a distinct perceived lack of social support such as disability benefits while their financial situation was becoming more dire due to disability-related discrimination against them for their injuries. This was having a knock-on effect on their social situation and exacerbating their bitterness about the more poverty-related themes.

Finally, as Japan's medical system was talked about so frequently, I did not want to misrepresent the comments as having been neutral. Far from it, most of them were negative, with none of the vloggers having had a positive experience with it. Therefore 'the medical system' category is divided into mention of positive and negative experiences respectively.

Further notes:

'Alcohol consumption' included women actively drinking alcoholic drinks while recording the vlogs, or had alcohol containers in the shot, even though none of them mentioned alcohol in any significant or discernible way. Consumption was casualised and normalised to the point that some vloggers finished their drinks, then had jump cuts in the videos to them returning from convenience stores with more alcoholic drinks so as to continue drinking that they made no effort to hide. These were far too numerous to remain unincluded. The silence on this seemed somehow louder than words when alcohol is known to be a depressant. Therefore, I refer to alcohol consumption in the way that it exists as a presence in the shots, while simultaneously being absent in the words. Various literature links alcohol consumption to low mood and depression. Examples include, but are not limited to, Heinz

et al.'s (2001, pp.487-495) work on serotonergic dysfunction and negative mood states in response to alcohol intake, and Turnbull and Gornbergs' (1988, pp. 374-382) work on co-occurrence of depression-related symptoms and alcohol abuse issues in women.

'Medical bills' also (more often than not) refers to the fear of medical bills that prevented vloggers accessing formalised medical help. There was significant overlap between data from when this was mentioned, and when the medical system was talked about negatively in a more general context.

Data

Theme	V1 (N=13)	V2 (N=8)	V3 (N=7)	Vloggers Total (N=28)	Advocates Total (N=23)
Agoraphobic symptoms	9	2	0	11	4
Alcohol consumption	8	3	1	12	2
Anxiety	8	1	0	9	13
Body dysphoria	1	2	1	4	3
Childhood trauma	3	1	0	4	2
Depression	13	2	1	16	18
Desire to escape a personal social situation	5	8	1	14	22
Details of attempt plans for another future attempt	2	0	4	6	3
Education	3	4	2	9	5
Emotional abuse	2	6	4	12	8
Family	6	4	2	12	9
Feelings of failure	11	2	0	13	2
Financial hardship	7	5	3	15	7
Finding poetic or floral meanings behind suicide	8	7	1	16	3
Grief	2	1	0	3	0
Having to go without basic necessities	5	4	3	12	2

Injuries from previous suicide attempts	3	0	1	4	0
Interest in experiencing the means	4	0	0	4	1
Medical bills	6	2	0	8	5
Medication	8	2	1	11	2
Parenthood	0	4	5	9	2
Patriarchy/Gerontocracy/Chauvinism	0	3	0	3	6
Pessimism about the future	2	8	0	10	22
Pets	4	1	3	8	3
Physical abuse	0	2	2	4	6
Politics	0	1	0	1	6
Relationships (with partner(s))	3	4	4	11	6
Responsibility to others	3	5	4	12	8
Sacrifice	1	1	0	2	3
Self-harm	8	2	3	13	4
Self-harm/suicide attempts as shows of romantic intent	6	0	0	6	1
Sex (Consensual)	0	0	0	0	15
Sexual abuse	5	3	2	10	7
Shuukatsu	4	2	2	8	2
Struggles with same-sex attraction	6	3	2	11	3
Suicide as something beautiful	1	0	1	2	5
Taking self-responsibility (for a debt/mistake)	1	2	1	4	3
The medical system (Negatively)	7	3	1	11	8
The medical system (Positively)	0	0	0	0	3

Table 1: The actual numbers of each set of people who respectively talked about each theme for any length of time.

Theme	V1 (%)	V2 (%)	V3 (%)	Vloggers Total (%)	Advocates Total (%)
Agoraphobic symptoms	69.2	25.0	0.0	39.3	17.4
Alcohol consumption	61.5	37.5	14.3	42.9	8.7
Anxiety	61.5	12.5	0.0	32.1	56.5
Body dysphoria	7.7	25.0	14.3	14.3	13.0
Childhood trauma	23.1	12.5	0.0	14.3	8.7

Depression	100.0	25.0	14.3	57.1	78.3
Desire to escape a personal social situation	38.5	100.0	14.3	50.0	95.7
Details of attempt plans for another future attempt	15.4	0.0	57.1	21.4	13.0
Education	23.1	50.0	28.6	32.1	21.7
Emotional abuse	15.4	75.0	57.1	42.9	34.8
Family	46.2	50.0	28.6	42.9	39.1
Feelings of failure	84.6	25.0	0.0	46.4	8.7
Financial hardship	53.8	62.5	42.9	53.6	30.4
Finding poetic or floral meanings behind suicide	61.5	87.5	14.3	57.1	13.0
Grief	15.4	12.5	0.0	10.7	0.0
Having to go without basic necessities	38.5	50.0	42.9	42.9	8.7
Injuries from previous suicide attempts	23.1	0.0	14.3	14.3	0.0
Interest in experiencing the means	30.8	0.0	0.0	14.3	4.3
Medical bills	46.2	25.0	0.0	28.6	21.7
Medication	61.5	25.0	14.3	39.3	8.7
Parenthood	0.0	50.0	71.4	32.1	8.7
Patriarchy/Gerontocracy/Chauvinism	0.0	37.5	0.0	10.7	26.1
Pessimism about the future	15.4	100.0	0.0	35.7	95.7
Pets	30.8	12.5	42.9	28.6	13.0
Physical abuse	0.0	25.0	28.6	14.3	26.1
Politics	0.0	12.5	0.0	3.6	26.1
Relationships (with partner(s))	23.1	50.0	57.1	39.3	26.1
Responsibility to others	23.1	62.5	57.1	42.9	34.8
Sacrifice	7.7	12.5	0.0	7.1	13.0
Self-harm	61.5	25.0	42.9	46.4	17.4
Self-harm/suicide attempts as shows of romantic intent	46.2	0.0	0.0	21.4	4.3
Sex (Consensual)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	65.2
Sexual abuse	38.5	37.5	28.6	35.7	30.4
Shuukatsu	30.8	25.0	28.6	28.6	8.7

Struggles with same-sex attraction	46.2	37.5	28.6	39.3	13.0
Suicide as something beautiful	7.7	0.0	14.3	7.1	21.7
Taking self-responsibility (for a debt/mistake)	7.7	25.0	14.3	14.3	13.0
The medical system (Negatively)	53.8	37.5	14.3	39.3	34.8
The medical system (Positively)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.0

Table 2: The amount of each set of people who respectively talked about each theme for any length of time calculated as a percentage (rounded to one decimal place).

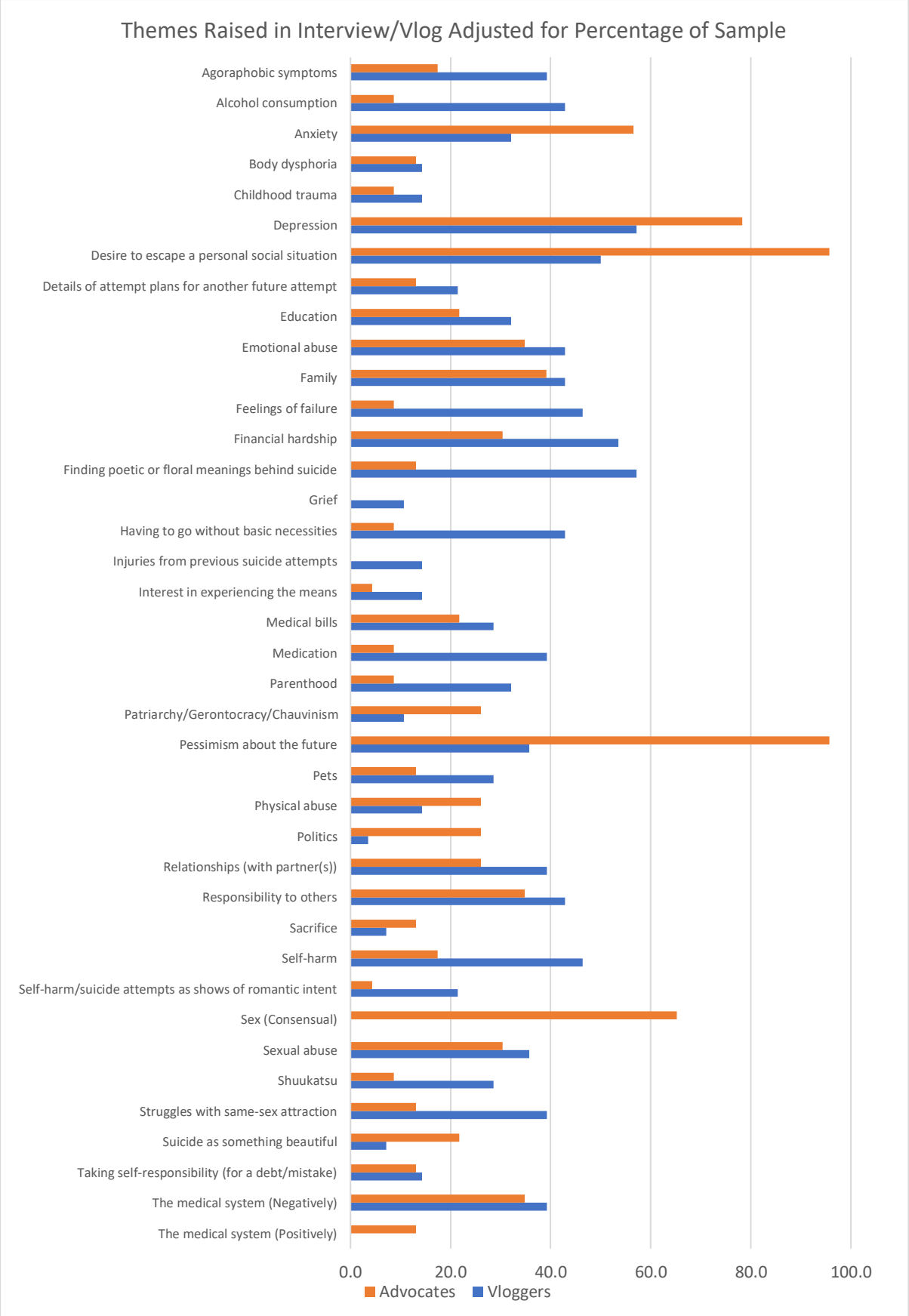

Figure 1: Side by side, the percentages of the advocates and vloggers that respectively talked about each theme for any length of time.

Disparities: a discussion

Though it would be a fallacy of false equivalency to claim that a testimony obtained through a semi-structured interview process is equivalent to a testimony recorded in an online vlog, certain stark disparities between the two groups illustrated in Figure 1 might still give a starting point as to what to scrutinise for further questioning in a later study building on this data.

Particularly different in number are the mentions of either 'fear of going outside', and/or inclinations towards a *hikikomori*-like[6] lifestyle to avoid the outdoors. These have been grouped as 'agoraphobic symptoms'. An explanation for this might be that people who are withdrawing from society are also withdrawing from means of accessing advocacy and support, so people with these symptoms are not presenting themselves to the advocates. Therefore, this underrepresentation might lessen the advocates' impressions of the importance of ideas and inclinations around voluntary withdrawal from society as it relates to the wider suicide situation.

The vloggers' pessimism about the future was a lot more intense and abject than the advocates'. Though an overwhelming majority of the advocates did answer that the social situation for young women in Japan is worsening, most held out hope that after certain larger events (examples given included the pandemic, the current partially pandemic-induced global economic downturn, and geopolitical tensions with Russia) had passed, Japan had the potential to improve in many ways. Two of the advocates were concerned about global warming and an oncoming climate catastrophe. With joking emphasis, they referred to the Earth, or parts of it, being 'on fire'. This difference seems to be accounted for by the fact the vloggers were creating content focussed on a situation from the perspective of a young Japanese woman, so the contents' scope did not allow for much of a reflection on wider geopolitics, and was more concerned with why the individual content creator

[6] Here I use the term *hikikomori* in the definition: ''shut-ins', or 'those who voluntarily withdraw from society and isolate themselves indoors', as is the working definition used by Saikō and Angles (2013) in their ethnographic work exploring the social phenomenon, though the actual term '*hikikomori*' was sometimes explicitly used, especially by those in group V1, who referred to such inclinations as a symptom of their self-diagnosed or formally diagnosed depression.

(and/or her cohort) struggled to see a future worth living to see to the extent that they would attempt to die by suicide.

Many of the vloggers sought floral or poetic meanings to suicide and self-destructive behaviours, while most of the advocates did not. This could indicate a slight disconnect between the ways that suicidal ideas are conceptualised and constructed that the advocates are misunderstanding. This has implications for suicide intervention strategies. I would recommend and encourage my fellow suicide researchers to examine the poetic discourses floating around the internet on message boards such as Ni-channeru[7] and other online communities more intensely. People in the vlogging group were acting upon poetry, and often the plans for suicide attempts involved places they found beautiful, or methods they found poetic meanings in. An example of this is: "after days of *shuukatsu* [a job-hunting process], I lie on my sofa. I cannot move. The tears will not stop. I think 'if I cut myself too' the blood and the tears are not different. [They will] flow like water" – V2 group vlogger.

There are suicide hotspots at places the vloggers described in poetic ways. If internet users and service users of advocacies and crisis support services are talking about certain means or suicide sites poetically, there is an opportunity being missed if we simply dismiss these and focus only on what is rational rather than what is also poetic. Trends in poetic rhetorical discourse that were too-often overlooked by the advocates in interview could give us clues as to where suicide hotspots may arise so that these potential hotspots can become targets for pre-emptive crisis support measures, which might be more effective than more scattergun approaches to employing on-the-ground crisis support. Likewise, if there are new trends in the poetic discussions in posts and conversations about suicide means being noticed by suicide professionals, this knowledge could give us, as suicidologists, a new weapon in the fight against suicide in the form of recommendations for means-restriction targeted at those poeticised means.

[7] This is a forum site, otherwise sometimes referred to as '2ch', which the two women injured by H_2S gathered information for their suicide attempt method from.

The sexual discourse

The largest disparity within the discourse was that none of the vloggers talked about consensual sex, though many talked about sexually abusive behaviours of others towards themselves and/or other women. In contrast, 65.2% of the advocates seemed to want to talk at length about sexual intercourse, often de-railing our discussions. None of my questions were intended to elicit responses about sexual intercourse and this topic came seemingly out of nowhere in many of the interviews. I cannot say that these segues in the conversation particularly engaged with many wider sociological issues. Nonetheless, 65.2% is too statistically significant to ignore. There was much talk from the advocates about gendered expectations or assumptions about women's 'roles' during sex, and how this could form a wider comment that perhaps this gendered trend of 'submissiveness' and 'passiveness' in heterosexual intercourse for women (according to the advocates) is reflective of wider societal expectations of women to be less domineering and more agreeable in everyday life. Perhaps it is also reflective of power hierarchies in general Japanese society.

I reflect also that although my questions did not ask about sex, they did ask about young women. As I do so with both this and my own positionality as a young man considered, I question whether the lengthy explanations about sex would have been so statistically significant in their numbers if I had been talking about other demographics instead? Perhaps 'this man wants to talk about young Japanese women' meant to the advocates that 'this man wants to talk about sex', as a result of an expectation that men would find women interesting due to their bodies rather than anything deeper. In contrast, the vloggers were a lot more introspective and spent the vlogs talking about how they felt and the social context of their mental health states.

With the interviewees, I noticed that once one topic they thought otherwise taboo to talk about had been covered, others usually followed in quick succession. If they felt that once the suicide rate crisis was being actively talked about, other social norms and taboos could be dispensed with, it is indicative that social norms and taboos being dispensed with could help more people feel able to talk about the way that they are feeling and their suicidal

intent. By breaking down one taboo, a precedent is then set for more taboos to fall. Perhaps just the same as these advocates had so much to say to myself, a stranger to most of them, about something so personal and potentially sensitive as their sexual encounters as soon as they were given a space free of the taboos around suicide, by giving a non-judgemental space to people who might find it therapeutic to talk about suicide in which they are assured taboos are out of the window, we can make these discussions easier to happen.

Financial hardship

'Having to go without basic human needs', and 'financial hardship' being themes with a large disparity speaks perhaps to a lack of understanding or an underestimation of the role poverty and financial wellbeing can play in mental health outcomes from the advocates' side (Ryu and Fam, 2022, pp.1-18). With the pandemic-induced economic downturn beckoning in an increased likelihood of employment issues among young women, this figure from the vloggers' side may also be exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic conditions (Ueda, 2021a).

Same-sex attraction

The difference was statistically significant between the percentages of the vloggers who talked about their struggles with same-sex attraction, many in the context of tensions it created with their parents, peers, employers, and the advocates concerned with their needs. The difference of 3x the percentage of vloggers talking about it compared to the advocates becomes even more stark when two of the three advocates who spoke about women's struggles with same-sex attraction in Japanese society were from the LGBT organisation 'Stonewall Japan', whose aims were especially aligned with understanding the struggles of sexual minorities in Japan. This may be a simple bias or coincidence due to the vloggers being a self-selected group. There is also the possibility that even if women from sexual minorities were visiting or interacting with the organisations I contacted, they might not have been open about their sexuality or its role in their suicidal ideation. With such a small sample size for the vlog data, it could also be the case that vlogging platforms were accessed more by this group. It could be that some of the userbase use the platform to

access or respond to content about LGBT issues, and so there is an overrepresentation of this group on the platform. What is certain is that these platforms are sites in which content is being created that addresses issues for LGBT women in Japan in ways that are deeply personal to their content creators. Where intersectional issues for women who also experience same-sex attraction exist within the suicide context, this dataset shows that organisations wanting to better understand and target these queer issues can do so effectively by accessing the platforms these women also use.

Even so, that 39.3% of the studied group with serious suicidal intent spoke about struggling with their same-sex attraction ('outing' themselves in the process), speaks volumes for the failings of the mental health care system and general society to create a world its female sexual minorities can see themselves wanting to live in. "Japan does not have any nationally representative survey that includes a question on self-identification as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual" (OECD, 2019, p.1). Therefore, it is difficult to gage how the 39.3% figure for suicidal women also experiencing same-sex attraction compares to rates of same-sex attraction in Japan more generally, or how overrepresented (or not) women experiencing same-sex attraction may have been in the sample. However, a previous study by the OECD (ibid) reveals that the societal context LGBT women are living in may be less conducive to survival than those of cisgender heterosexual persons (especially given potentially different financial contexts). The OECD's report continued to say that, "low acceptance of LGBT people puts them at risk of discrimination[...]. LGBT people are penalised with respect to employment status and labour earnings. Experimental data confirm that this penalty at least partly reflects labour market discrimination: with the same curriculum vitae, homosexual applicants [were] 1.5 times less likely to be invited to a job interview than heterosexual applicants when their sexual orientation is conveyed through their volunteer engagement or work experience in a gay and lesbian organisation" (ibid).

Summary

These groups are very different and therefore it makes sense that representations of, and ideas about, Japanese society will differ between the groups. The vloggers are a very unique category. Due to limitations in this study's scope, with its a sample size of N=28, it cannot

claim to be representative of all young women in Japan. However, they have talked about issues which are indicative of a wider social context in which they exist. As an indicative dataset seeking to understand suicide in Japanese society without ignoring the voices of those affected directly, this is a rich dataset. It is performative rather than discursive, which does affect its content. While many of the vloggers were composed, some spoke manically. Compared to the advocates, the vloggers generally spoke in more extreme, fatalistic or sensationalising ways. In contrast, all but two of the informants had more reserved, considered responses. This paper takes the testimonies gathered during the research at their word, these are still representations of Japan constructed through discourses and experiences which will flavour perspectives in interesting ways. The differences between the responses shows how much the context of the representations can shape ideas formed around the wider cultural field of suicide in Japan.

Abuse 1: The Explosion

“There’s this hierarchical, male, chauvinistic society that's killing them, and repressing them”. Temple University Tokyo Campus Professor of Social Psychology (name not given by source). Interviewed by René Duignan for his documentary, ‘Saving 10,000 – Winning a War on Suicide in Japan’ (2013).

The beginning

When I first began emailing out my recruitment emails, a curious event occurred. This was so affective and heartfelt that I have felt it pertinent to dedicate a chapter to the themes she raised out of respect to the sincerity, anger, and desperation to be heard in the voice of the informant. For the purposes of being true to the sentiment felt during this specific spontaneous interaction, I have felt it a matter of duty to include its main points to the extent that the informant herself consented to her testimony being reported.

Rather than responding to my emailed requests for meetings via organised web calls, I woke in the early morning to a call coming through from an unknown contact on the LINE internet calling app I had used for a prior piece of research on Japanese women who self-identified as a sexual minority. She asked me if I was the "anthropologist who wanted to listen". I confirmed that I was, and she explained that she had had the recruitment email I sent forwarded to her and she had checked with the president of her organisation if it would be okay to represent them. She recognised my name from my prior work advocating for women's rights in Japan and had procured my LINE contact information from a fellow activist. Bleary-eyed, I went through the process of confirming consent to be interviewed and have the transcript stored, which she hurried me through, annoyed that the words she was desperate to speak were delayed even those few minutes.

Medical anthropologists must seek to be at an odd nexus between professional detachment so as not to affect our informants' behaviours and testimonies, while paradoxically presenting ourselves as fellow human beings with high levels of empathy, as appropriate to the situation for the purposes of our research. However, for this interaction, the scales were tipped. More than that, the table the scales were sitting on was upended, leaving them to crash to the floor as the formality of question lists and proper step-by-step scientific practice dissolved in the passion and fury of an advocate for women being able to see a life worth living desperate to speak. She simply did not care for the academic method of enquiry, and informed me quite bluntly that she just wanted someone to '*kitto*' (finally) hear her speak. She was angry and reported that she was tired of women's stories never coming to light. So, I decided to be quiet, and give her the time and the space to speak freely.

Though uncomfortable to read, I felt it a matter of academic integrity to include sections of her testimony at length, with breaks to analyse her claims throughout the chapter. She asked me to use the pseudonym '*Bakuhatsu*' for her, which means a physical explosion such as from a bomb, or an unexpected outburst of anger. *"Watashi ha bakuhatsu desu. Watashitachi, onna no ko ha, bakudan desu*". Bluntly put, she told me, "I am the explosion. We young women [she pauses for effect] are bombs". What struck me especially about her wording is the metaphor that there are two ways that women can explode. This metaphor was consistent throughout our conversation. She confirmed her meaning at the end of our

interview as she thanked me. These 'bombs' that are women loaded with the 'gunpowder of abuse' can either explode with words in a more healthy, almost therapeutic sense by having someone to talk to, or self-destruct behaviourally, but it would be more preferable if they never had to become 'bombs' in the first place.

Sex as currency exchanged for emotional labour

Bakuhatsu told me that although it was not my intention, I was only the second person in her life to perform emotional labour for her while she herself 'exploded'. The first and only other time was with an ex-boyfriend after she had asked for emotional support following an incident with a '*chikan*'[8]. She grimaced remembering this time. I asked her what her expression meant.

It transpired that he had wanted her to "quickly finish" because he wanted to be thanked with sexual acts in an almost transactional sense. "But then I think this is something you need to understand about the suicide situation. Men sexually abuse us. We women, right, we young women, we could all tell you a similar story. Then when we want support, we can only get it if we, well if you are in Tokyo, Osaka, the like, Kobe, we can pay a host for it with money. But how do we get the money? Without that, there is nothing to do but pay a friend for it with sex. Because sex caused the problem, our mental health gradually becomes worse. So we get depressed, we get PTSD from this shit, inescapable situation. Then we explode. And maybe they take us to the hospital to repair us or maybe they take us to the morgue, that is to say, the scrapyard".

From what she was saying, unless proper mental health care including talking therapies is made more readily available, the second method of 'exploding' occurs, and the 'bombs' that are these young women 'explode' in a self-destructive way with self-harm or by attempting suicide. Talking therapies, the likeness of which our conversation took on, have been proven to be highly effective at treating depression (Clarke et al., 2015, pp.58-70).

[8] A *chikan* is a man who molests or sexually assaults women at busy train stations or in packed-out train carriages, utilising the crowds to increase ambiguity as to who the perpetrator is.

Bakuhatsu - “I talk to suicidal women my age all the time. It is not natural. They are made to become that way. They are my age, my cohort. They are sexually harassed. They are assaulted in their offices. They progress to management and they think they are doing so well for themselves until they realise they are the only young woman in their office. And in their office, all but them are men twice their age or more. And then the sexual harassment starts again”.

She paused, inviting enquiry.

Interviewer - “They become targets”?

Bakuhatsu - “They don’t *become* anything. The men target them. It is different”.

In Japanese, when discussing difficult topics, it is linguistically unusual to talk so bluntly and to not use the reflexive or passive voice. Continuing, Bakuhatsu highlighted this as an example of how idiomatic phraseology in Japanese linguistics shifts the blame for antisocial and/or abusive behaviour from the perpetrator(s) to the victim(s).

“And this is the way they say it, which is part of what is so infuriating. Whose fault is it? Whose fault? Because *we* ‘become’ the target, it is *our* fault? No. It is *their* [here she used ‘*aitsu no*’ - a derogatory expletive form of saying ‘their’] fault, right. Sexual harassment, power harassment, touching us, the [here she used the slang term ‘*kimoi yatsu*’ with a grimacing tone, which has no direct translation, but refers to dirty, sleazy, often unwashed older men when they are sexually forward] are at fault”.

What is said yet unsaid

Linguistically interesting here, is that she tiredly used contracted forms of *wasei eigo* words (words adapted from English terms). ‘*sekkushuaru harasumento*’ (sexual harassment) became *‘sekuhara’*, while ‘*pawa- harasumento*’ (power harassment - the abuse of power dynamics usually within offices to influence, control, or otherwise act inappropriately

towards someone of a lower rank) became *'pawahara*'. The contractions were said in such a way that it hinted that the frequency she had to use those terms in her life were likely high enough to merit saving the time by contracting them.

Japanese colloquial linguistics have ways of revealing more about the lives of the users of the language than they might initially anticipate or intend. Etymology surrounding contractions of violent terms can be more deeply analysed. Throughout the interviews there was a gendered divide I noticed in the terms denoting sexual violence towards women between male and female interviewees. The women interviewed used contracted forms of acts of violence and sexual harassment which were more commonplace. She explained they were partially contracted to make taboo topics quicker and easier to talk about with their female friends and partners. When I asked an advocate from a sex education and consent charity about this, she said "if you have a formal way of saying [about these taboo things], right, if you have a long way of saying it, it becomes difficult to say".

When men referred to sexual violence or sexually controlling or coercive behaviours, they used terms which the same advocate identified as almost completely confined in usage to internet slang used to title and search for sexually violent pornographic materials. She pondered for a second after saying this before elaborating further. She sighed almost defeatedly and said, "you know it somehow gives me hope because you do not know this already. Even the male advocates we meet, they use these terms and when they use them we think, ah, so even you, when you go home, you look at this kind of thing. Rape, revenge pornography[9], fantasies about power, fantasies about 'doing' [here she made a disgusted face while using slang to denote sexual contact in which an orifice is penetrated forcefully] a 'JK' or a 'JD'". She said these terms as if mocking the men who use them. "Just for a second consider, a lot of these videos, a lot of these *eromanga* (erotic manga) are from the cameraman or mangaka's perspective. Are even the male advocates fantasising about 'being the person in the scene' and raping a woman"?

[9] This refers to pornographic materials of intimate partners posted online without their consent.

This was quite uncomfortable to consider, and my data was insufficient to perform a linguistic analysis on what she had said at that point, so we progressed with the interview on a different tangent. I later revisited her claims and found that they were largely consistent with the interview data, except for when she herself used the terms mockingly. After performing a linguistic analysis on the way that male advocates referred to sexual violence against women in social circles, the workplace, and their home lives, I found that the way that the male-identifying interviewees referred to violence against women was seen as "fetishising the violence" by female participants. The terms used by the male participants that were considered "fetishising" are listed below:

Term	Meaning	Usage by male interviewee(s)
Reipu	*Wasei eigo* etymology, this comes from the English 'rape'.	"Well, the rape club [a university club called '*Su-pa-furi-'* in which rapes of female students were planned and enacted (Yuji and Masamao, 2012, pp.220-222; Lewis, 2003)] was big news, right. But then porn searches for '*reipu*' increase too, right. So maybe if we stop talking about rape it will not be a problem".
Sefure/Refure	Contracted *wasei eigo* terms. These are short for 'sex friend', and 'rape friend', respectively, though the latter is not in common usage. This may have been an inappropriate joke but I could not quite gage his	"'S*efure*' or '*refure*', it is the same. You know, it is the same sound. It is just a little bit more erotic if you call it the one you like. '*Yamete*' [lit: 'stop' (command form)] and '*yamete*' are the same. It's like 'dirty talk'". He used the English for 'dirty talk', as if to imply that just the same as he accepted the ways others in English-speaking countries have sex, it was always going to be different for him. To him, a commanding "stop!" from a partner can be conceptualised as rape if it makes it more "erotic", but the implication was I needed to understand that when that happened, the sex *was* consensual and the yell of "stop!" can be used to appeal to a fetish

	intent as the comment seemed off-hand.	rather than to indicate a lack of consent to being in the situation.
Fera	Contracted *wasei eigo* of the English word 'fellacio'.	"Politicians think about 'fera' when women talk. [Women] might not be serious [about issues they raise], they think".
Manko	An expletive form of 'vagina'.	"People who want something sweet are many. People who like alcohol are many. But you need to leave the izakaya first before you can buy strong zero [(a strong, seltzer-like alcoholic beverage)], and the mango [slips up the pronunciation on purpose so as to pronounce 'mango' as manko'] is the sweetest flavour". He then followed up with the pun, "*Mochikaereru ne",* meaning "you can take it home with you" with a verb which can both mean 'to take something such as takeaway food or groceries home with you', and a derogatory slang way of referring to women who are 'easy to take home' ('*mochikaeri'*).
Suru	Literally 'to do', but used colloquially to mean a sexual act in which an orifice is penetrated	"The point of *gyaranomi*, *papakatsu* too, is you 'do' a young girl". *Gyaranomi* is a practice of men paying (usually younger) women to come drinking with them, with the expectation of sexual gratification. *Papakatsu* is similar to 'sugar daddying', but usually practiced between older men and teenage girls.
Onani	Masturbate. This term also implies	"*Onani* is safer than sex so the safest way to get money as a sex worker".

	'for viewers' pleasure.	
JK	Short form for '*Joshikousei*', meaning high school girl.	The interviewee explained to me that this term is often used as a search query on pornographic websites to find videos catering to the fetishisation of girls too young to legally consent to being in pornography, because the term *'joshikousei'* is often blocked by content filters.
JD	Short form for '*Joshidaisei*', meaning female university student.	^As above, the same interviewee explained that this term is often used as a search query on pornographic websites, though this is used to search materials of a marginally less legally dubious nature.
Ti-nu	Short-form slang term for the *wasei eigo* version of 'teenager', this is mainly used as a category of pornography.	As above.
Rezu	From the reclaimed *wasei eigo* term 'rezubian,' from the English 'lesbian'.	This term has caused contention within LGBT rights groups in Japan, as 'rezubian' was a slur reclaimed by sapphic communities, but has now been turned into a short-form used to refer to them in a fetishising manner. A male interviewee claimed that same-sex love between women will become more accepted as materials featuring '*rezu*' intimate relationships become more popular.
Gyaru	A woman who adopts western-	Mentioned in the context of employment, the interviewee referred to the ability to be paid more

	inspired looks, often including tight-fitting clothing. It is both a subculture term and a way of referring to women who work in hostess bars and in *kabakura* (sexual entertainer) roles, the latter occupation being referred to in short-form as *kabagyaru*.	for an *arubaito* (part time job) at a 'girls bar' if you meet this aesthetic.
Nanpa	Pickup artist (noun), or to pick someone up (verb)	"Women are sexually harassed outside of train stations and in Shibuya by *nanpa*".
Yareru	Lit: Can 'do'. 'Sexually exciting'	"The female university students you can do ranking", referring to a controversial feature in the Japanese magazine 'SPA'.

Table 3: Terminology related to sexual violence

The point made here is not that men in advocacy roles should be singled out and attacked. The point is that this is indicative of a wider normalisation and casualisation of violent and derogatory language used about women especially by men. It is very fathomable that this kind of language might be internalised and play a part in gendered inequalities. The normalisation of these things being said might be part of something that at times might translate into more active behaviours that exceed simple words, and feelings that this kind of violence is just something to be expected rather than actively abhorred.

Culture shock

I remember a legal advocate (Tammy – pseudonym) telling me of a great culture shock to her, having moved from South Korea to Japan for work. She would often encounter women who had the same story of men groping them in the street and then them going to the *koban* (small booth-like police outpost with officers inside) to report the sexual assault. Upon hearing these reports the general response from the officers was to ask “was anything stolen?”. If nothing had been stolen the case would be dropped there and then. She said that interactions such as these can leave women with the feeling that their lives, dignity, mental health, and bodily autonomy, are worth “less than a handbag or a purse”. These feelings of low self-worth spread by hearing derogatory comments, she believed, were “obviously” going to affect rates of women developing poor mental wellbeing, and becoming depressed. They were also more likely to make Japan feel like a less safe place to be a woman. Can a life worth living be imagined in this kind of environment as something people already needing a future worth living to see might want to strive for? Is the good life a suicidal person might imagine for their future if they can overcome a desire to end their life one which includes this kind of language and action as a norm? Or would survivorship improve if this were acknowledged as a problem and acted upon with changes to police protocol for handling sexual violence, and a greater intolerance of derogatory or degrading language and action towards women?

The image of sex

Also brought up here is how the image of ‘this is what sex should look like’ can come from pornography.

Tammy - “So I think the problem is there's just rampant rape culture in Japan and the men are brought up on it. Their sexual education is very limited, and everybody sort of grows up on rampant pornography and their porn sort of idealises rape where women saying ‘no’

don't mean ‘no’. They like it. They're just saying ‘no’ because they're shy [...] Women often scream ‘no’ when they don't mean ‘no’, or they might mean ‘no’, but nobody cares anyway because they think they actually mean ‘yes’, um, deep down. [...] I've slept with Japanese women and they say, ‘no, stop’. But they mean ‘yes’. And that disturbed me so much because when they say ‘no’, I would stop. And they'll be like, ‘why are you stopping’ and I’m like, ‘because you said no’. And they said ‘no, I mean, when I say no, it doesn't mean no’.

She continued: “They literally said when they say ‘no’, it doesn't mean ‘no’, and that they say it because people like it when they do that. And they scream and just say ‘stop’, and ‘no’, and ‘I don't like it’ because they think that's the way to have sex. Women should say ‘no’ as a means to, you know, make themselves desirable, because that's what porn actresses do. And so men don't have this concept that they might be raping a woman. They don't even have that as like on the back of their mind as a worry”.

Meue/meshita relationships

Morbid jokes had come from one of the V1 vloggers, where the vlogger in question formed puns based on exactly the same contractions *Bakuhatsu* had used, fusing *‘sekuhara’*, and ‘*pawahara*’ with the old-fashioned word for suicide, *‘harakiri*’, (lit. to cut one’s intestines, referencing a traditional but now antiquated feudal practice of ritual suicide with a katana-style sword). She joked that ‘*sekuhara’* was becoming ‘*sekuharakiri’,* and that *‘pawahara’* was becoming *‘pawaharakiri’* in *meue/meshita* relationships well-documented by ethnographers of Japan and scholars of Japanese business practice.

‘Meue’ – literally a combination of the kanji characters meaning ‘eye’, and ‘above’, describes somebody that others of a lower social status are conditioned to look up to. ‘*Meshita’* is a combination of the kanji for ‘eye’, and ‘below’, and describes somebody whom others of a societally enforced idea that they are of ‘higher’ status might look down upon (Hendry, 2008, pp.51-52; Nakane, 1970, p.39). This dynamic both affects, and is self-reciprocated by, linguistics. Somebody who is seen as *meshita* will be talked down to, with very little regard for politeness or honorifics. Conversely, they will be expected to talk up to those regarded

as *meue* in a polite *keigo* form, using so-called 'humble' or self-deprecating forms of verbs in reference to themselves, and aggrandising forms of verbs towards the *meue* people.

In practice, discrimination often plays a role in affecting perceived status, which many vloggers tied to their ongoing senses of self-worth. Sugimoto (2014, pp.46-47) describes women who attain high positions in Japanese society as "status-inconsistent". He gives the example of a hypothetical "Korean female doctor in Japan", who would be a "status-inconsistent person in the sense that she is high on the ladders of income and educational qualifications, but low on those of gender and ethnicity because of prevailing prejudice and discrimination". As a Korean female lawyer, Tammy (pseudonym) is an example of this. She complained of herself and her female colleagues being disbelieved about their professions and subsequently being talked down to. Speaking about her experiences at a series of social events organised through the 'meetup' app platform, she said about the host of the meetup:

Tammy - "Every time [the host] would introduce me to people, he would always say I'm a lawyer's secretary. And like he always said that. It's like he thinks I didn't mean what I said. Like, he always told people behind my back that I'm just a secretary of a lawyer. He couldn't wrap his mind around it, and that was actually, well, I mean… the shock on every Japanese man's face, whenever I said I'm a lawyer… Just the world is very backwards in Japan. I mean, women have been in high power positions for decades in other countries, but it's still seen as incredibly abnormal… They were always in such disbelief whenever I said I'm a lawyer. And whenever asked to guess my job, even when I was in a full suit at parties, they would still think I do something 'feminine' like fashion or makeup. If I was in a law firm, I must be a secretary".

She gave a cultural comparison. "For context, I mean just across the sea we have Korea and on multiple occasions people have guessed within their first three guesses that I'm a lawyer, just upon meeting me, even though I wasn't wearing a suit".

Many common, deeply ingrained societal reinforcers of both gerontocratic and patriarchal power dynamics already exist. These hierarchies are *in-theory* incumbent to recognise merit

and loyalty to the company required to climb the ranks in a 'respect is earned' mentality (Onodera, 2007, pp.240-244). In actuality, interviewees and vloggers spoke at-length on how status gained from being male or being older was often used to climb the ranks of organisations quicker than women and younger people could. This resulted in the interviewees saying that they believed older men felt a sense of entitlement, not just to higher-ranking, or better-paying positions, but to the resources, unpaid labour, and misuse of their subordinates' bodies. An interviewee discussed this at length with me and concluded that ownership of the body that these women live in is shifted in the case of abuse of power. It becomes something partially misappropriated in ownership by an overbearing patriarchy.

One's place in hierarchies of power within classrooms, offices, and general society compared to those one might interact with can be assessed by the "'social distance'" between individuals, and is "determined by the age and status difference" of the individuals by comparison (Tanaka, 2008, p.127). Young women, being seen as 'below' older men in terms of both age and gender, are thus more susceptible to abuse of power, leading them to feel disenfranchised and humiliated. These structural inequalities are compounded when the process of increasing one's personal social status related to wealth and job title through promotion is more readily followed by men. Young women will often encounter hurdles to progression without even realising they existed.

Bakuhatsu had an interesting personal anecdote about welcoming a new team manager in her workplace. She said that. at the time, her boss had given a speech saying he hoped he can "be a light like the Sun" so that those beneath him could "be in a warm environment". I responded sympathetically, clarifying that I understood the analogy. To his mind, he would always be above. She would always be below. Bakuhatsu concurred with my interpretation, and said that this is just representative of the patriarchal norms that men grow up to expect, and that the continuation of these norms was due to their self-replicating nature. One person internalises the behaviours that cement men's place in the hierarchy from what they see and hear. If not exposed to new ideas they will replicate them and treat them as the norm, thus repeating the same behaviours which do not challenge this hierarchy.

Barriers to progression

One interviewee pointed to a clear example of barriers to progression from 2018. A famous and high-ranking medical school in Tokyo was involved in a high-profile scandal. Their staff were found to have been rigging test scores from university entrance exams to artificially inflate male entrants' scores while artificially deflating female entrants' scores so as to admit more men than women based on who ranked highest on test scores combined with high school grades. The reason or justification given for this when pressed by journalists was that it was felt by staff that women would be less likely to stay in a medical career, choosing instead to become housewives or give up their careers to raise children. An unnamed source from the university claimed that the discrimination policy was seen as a "necessary evil". "Many female students who graduate end up leaving medical practice to give birth and raise children," said the source. "There was a silent understanding [to prefer male students] as one way to resolve the doctor shortage". In this way, careers in the medical field were being barred to women due to stereotyping. That Katsunobu Kato, then health minister of Japan, responded to this scandal by promising that "his ministry will work to improve the options available to female doctors who seek time off to have children", (Dyer, 2018) followed by no actual governmental reprimand of the university might indicate a lack of willingness to fight these systemic inequalities or challenge stereotypes in good faith. To date, although the university did agree to pay out settlements to 14 women who sued on the grounds that they were subject to discriminative practices (supported by subpoenaed documentation) and missed out on places at the university, very little damage aside from reputational damage has been suffered by the university. A further nine universities were later identified by journalists at the Asahi Shinbun newspaper as having also been guilty of similar practices for over a decade (BBC News, 2018).

Falling

The mental health implications of this kind of subjugation have been explicitly linked to depression and suicidal ideation by interviewees and vloggers in many ways. As one vlogger (in the V1 set) put it, "if my words don't matter and I am attacked for telling a man to get off

my body, it's like my life too doesn't matter, right"? Another said, "we young women are told to be at the bottom of society. We are punished for trying to push to the top. So, we fall. Then we fall into depression". These experiences of feeling worth less than their male peers often moreover contributed to thoughts which exacerbated symptoms of depression. One Tokyo-based vlogger (V2 set) in her mid-twenties explained trying to improve her sense of self-worth after being denigrated systemically due to extensive experiences of sexism in education, the workplace and hiring practices. She thought that by "becoming strong like a man," wherein "strong" meant emotionally repressed as opposed to physically strong, she might be able to experience sexism less and be treated as 'equal' to her male colleagues. Ironically the depression, which was worsened, she said, by the repression of her emotions resulted in muscle wastage and a reduction in physical strength and capabilities due to a lack of exercise, and binge-eating as a coping mechanism.

"Life is really tough. I was really going crazy. And I am still, I feel always like I am about to cry a little. But I am really glad I was able to move forward a little in my strength. I want to disappear. I want to disappear. I want to disappear. I want to be reborn as a man. I was just thinking about 'what if it could be a reality'. I wouldn't get any tears. I didn't want to take a bath because I didn't want to become *kirei* (term meaning either clean, and/or pretty in a feminine sense). There was a time like this. It was a lifetime like this. I felt depressed".

In her other videos, she explained in-depth about her experiences of being taken advantage of by male teachers, fellow students, and colleagues. She would be yelled at in the workplace, she said. She would be told to kill herself and that she should be embarrassed when she struggled to keep up with unsustainable workloads despite working extensive amounts of unpaid overtime. When she was asked to go to the *izakaya* with her manager, supervisors, and male colleagues, she described being pressured to drink past the point of intoxication, and having strong drinks ordered for her during the period of the *nomihoudai* (a common deal at *izakaya*, especially in happy hours. It takes the form of 'all you can drink' within a set period of time for a set price). This was poorly disguised as being well-meaning so that it would be "*otokuna*" (good value for money) for her, but she felt that due to being groped by her colleagues and otherwise sexually assaulted, that she was there not as an

equal, but as an object; that they wanted to get her drunk so that she would be an easier target.

Bakuhatsu continued her interview with me by explaining perhaps the reason that negative workplace experiences were not so uncommon to hear about. She said that women would be reprimanded and have their jobs threatened for not being productive enough, despite their productivity and unpaid overtime often being greater than that of their male colleagues. But for men who sexually assault women in the workplace, she said the worst that would happen to them would be there would be a period wherein the women in the office would mistrust them and actively avoid them as a way of protest and social punishment. But other than that, as Japan does not have a legal way of firing somebody for sexual assault alone, the men would often simply be transferred to another branch of the company and find new targets there. As the victims of sexual harassment and/or assault knew this, Bakuhatsu explained that there was often a feeling of guilt associated with reporting sexual inappropriacy. What if the offender were to find new targets elsewhere because he got transferred away due to your report? There would also often be more repercussions for the victim than the perpetrator. Often, she said, the victim would be excluded from social events and conversations, with the men saying things like “don’t talk to her. She’ll lie and report you”. Again, even despite the social repercussions on them, this theme of women being systemically disbelieved persists.

Overall, when asked whether things are getting better for women in this regard, all but one interviewee who mentioned the situation regarding sexual and workplace abuse responded that, in their opinion, things are either worsening or, at the very least, not improving. And the rampant culture of the kinds of abuse that over a third of the vloggers said contributed to their feelings of helplessness, worthlessness and/or trauma, extends outside of the workplace too. Intimate partner violence, including sexual violence and physical violence both in public and in private were major causes for concern amongst interviewees. A 2018 cabinet office survey supports the need for concern. It revealed that at the point of data collection, 31.3% of women and 19.9% of men responded that they had experienced sexual or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. This survey included people both who had not yet had a partner, and whom did not currently have a partner. Therefore, the

rates of intimate partner violence, adjusted for exclusion of non-partnered survey recipients, would be significantly higher than the unadjusted figures (Suga, 2021; Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office, 2018).

Violence in public

A non-Japanese interviewee described incidents in Japan that her, her peers, and her co-workers were witness to which left them "in tears […] because [they] had seen" on multiple occasions "a woman getting beaten by her husband in the metro station or in public, and nobody did anything". She explained that passers-by "thought what happens between a man and his wife is between them". Upon attempting to intervene on a few of these occasions, Japanese passers-by would instead turn against them because they did not feel that it would be a "rightful intervention". Attempts to intervene, instead resulted in threats of the police being called on those intervening rather than on the perpetrators of intimate partner violence. What is ambiguous, and this study lacks information to ascertain with any certainty, is whether her and her peers' experiences were at all affected by racial politics, as she did describe them as being predominantly French or American.

Bakuhatsu explained at length the feelings of frustration and hopelessness for a future free of systemic violence that came not just from victims of violence, but also from people within the same age/gender cohort as those abused or assaulted. She caught her breath after her 'explosion' at me. I asked if she was okay and told her that her mental wellbeing came first and foremost in importance over my collection of data. She responded, "I just want to be heard", and that if she was heard she would become more *genki* (energetic and mentally well) again. She cried for a short while but implored me to stay on the line, then finished with, "I, well, we, young women see it happening to those around us. To those who look like us. To my age. Young women just the same as me. And then who is doing it? Older men. Like my boss. Like my co-workers. Like the men who say 'hey, won't you come to drink with us at the *izakaya'*. I am so scared. We are so scared. The next time, it's us".

Abuse 2: Profit

"Nobody kills themselves in a right state of mind. Nobody calmly says, 'you know what, I think that's enough now. I think it's time to kill myself. I've had enough of life'. It is always an element of mental illness […] that forces people to do that". It "come[s] from a trigger, from a pressure, from 'I can't get enough sleep; I am being overworked; I am being bullied by my boss; I am being forced to work these terribly long hours; I am being given impossible goals that I can't do; I am an inferior person; I am a failure to the company; I just want to get out! I can't take it anymore! I just can't take it anymore"!

-Rene Duignan, EU delegate and specialist advisor on suicide prevention policy to the Japanese National Diet (Saving 10,000 – Winning a War on Suicide in Japan, 2012)

Passing the blame for the wage gap

Bakuhatsu had also expanded on her frustrations and said that the low wages young women like her had come to expect which contributed to financial insecurity and becoming more susceptible to financial abuse were worsened by how widespread the workplace sexual harassment culture is. She, and four of the vloggers (3xV2, 1xV3) had explained that the pay ceiling for women is artificially lowered. Meanwhile women are blamed for not being "outgoing enough" to pursue other opportunities which might be more lucrative. They all had similar stories to tell: if men want a better wage, they can ask for a promotion or look for work in a different company. If women do the same, they fear moving to an office or new workplace situation in which they may be newly subjected to *pawa-hara* or *seku-hara,* or in which the situation is even worse than at their current job. All four said this causes fear of being traumatised or retraumatised. Two of the V2 set vloggers linked this directly to fear of being bullied into falling victim to the cultural phenomenon of *karōshi* (death by overwork) due to *pawa-hara*. As a famous case of an employee abused for free labour that

made it to national news, Matsuri Takahashi's name came up here, and on several other occasions by vloggers and advocates in reference to feelings of comparative powerlessness.

'*Burakku kigyou*'

Since Matsuri Takahashi's death in 2015, media outrage and an emotionally charged discourse surrounding younger workers' increased susceptibility to death by overwork has been building (Kamiashi, 2018). Despite suicide deaths being a major contributor to these *karōshi* figures, very little is being done to enact accountability measures upon companies, or even flag them as '*burakku kigyou*'.

'*Burakku kigyou'* was a term much-used by interviewees and vloggers alike. It translates literally to mean 'black companies' and refers to companies in which mistreatment or abuse of employees is a common occurrence (Niida and Konno, 2013, pp.85-88). Unequal power dynamics are often the context to *karōshi* deaths, with victims being forced to work extensive hours, which have only in 2017 been capped at 100 hours per month above the 40-hour work week in response to the outrage over Takahashi's death at age 24 (McCurry, 2017a). Six separate vloggers (1x V1, 4xV2, 1xV3), however, said that they had been forced by past or current employers to work more than that in (often unpaid) overtime, with the only difference being that many hours would not be recorded or reflected in their timesheets. When not reflected in their timesheets, they were not being paid. One commented, "I am dying. I wonder if I am already dead? I have killed myself, or maybe my *shachou* [meaning ambiguous – she could be referring to the company president, her manager, or her supervisor] is killing me. I wonder if he wants me to die? When he sees me cry, I wonder if he feels powerful. I wonder if he likes it. I work and take my life for what? Even if I work, I receive nothing. I wonder if that means my life is worth nothing"? This exploitative practice is well-documented in Japanese business literature, being termed '*zangyou kakushi'*, or 'hidden overtime'. It has further implications on tax, pay, mental health disparities between levels in companies, and the availability of workers to their families and dependents (Fukushima Government Labour Bureau, 2016; Nunoshise, 2019, p.69).

An interviewee from '*Haro- Wa-ku'*, the Japanese government's charity-backed employee advocacy support centre and ombudsman service shone light on the realities of the legislation's impact. Though initially hesitant to give her opinion, she said that many of the young women who contacted her in her professional capacity reported that not only were they being forced to work hours in excess of the 100-hour overtime limit each month, since the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, two further issues have exacerbated the situation.

In order to economise on staffing costs, she told me that employers were increasingly underpaying employees by making verbal agreements to pay them for overtime work, often with a saccharin reasoning that they wanted to do more to support their lower-level employees' financial situations during this "difficult time". Come payday, the extra pay for the overtime was not paid out. With no formal contract, the employees did not have enough paperwork to bring to a legal representative or ombudsman and sue for the unpaid wages. The companies could just say that the extra work was voluntary, and the case would likely be thrown out due to lack of evidence. Thus, the financial planning that employees had done with the assumed wages in mind went awry, causing financial stress. Based on this answer, I asked the *Haro- Wa-ku* employee about the comment from a vlogger saying, "even if I work, I receive nothing. I wonder if that means my life is worth nothing". She said that that is not an uncommon sentiment to hear, especially among the female lower-level staff who contact the service. "She was crying, right? Most of them are".

She continued to the second issue which was that companies were economising a second time. They did so by firing people who did similar jobs to other employees, and then expecting the other staff to pick up their workload in addition to their already-existing, overburdened workload. This led to staff being bullied to work faster, harder, and longer with no additional pay for the increased workload in the majority of cases. When I enquired as to what the demographics were of complainants, she described them as "usually female, young, low-income employees, sometimes without support from families, sometimes with children. Single mothers with no money are very common. They are most of the ones who cry. You know – 'easy-to-bully' people". She said that a lot of the workers whose stories she was compiling for an ombudsman's report said that if they were to complain, refuse to work

the longer hours, or if the quality of their work or their mental health were to suffer due to overwork stress, they would be threatened with being laid off in an unstable job market. The state of the economy, especially through the pandemic, was a threat, she said, which was being leveraged for power by managers.

The secondary ever-present threat posed by the COVID-19 virus was also often leveraged against workers especially in customer-facing roles. "'What if you have become infected with the corona virus? You don't want to bring that home to your family. It's safer for them if you stay at work, right'". Guilt was used as an unsubtle manipulation tactic. I pressed the point and asked why the managers were doing this in her opinion. She put it simply. "They want a promotion. They want a bonus. If they save the company a million yen, they might get two, three hundred thousand yen as a bonus. They can say with pride, 'I saved two million yen by myself' if it's a salaried employee they cut. They think the *kaicho* [upper management] will be pleased". Throughout the interview her words described a culture within which people are consumed by ambition for their careers to progress within a society where one's self-worth is tied to status. More will be discussed on the actual attainability of that progression for young women in the lower rungs of the workforce in later chapters. But suffice it to say that the exploitation the managers she described were doing highlighted a prioritisation of personal career progression and financial gains over the mental, physical and social wellbeing of those who might be viewed as '*meshita*' to them within the company. It also begs an important question: what is the worth of a human life in Japan's business world? And does it differ depending on one's status within the assumed social hierarchy? If so, what does that mean for gender and race relations taking Hendry (2008, pp.51-52) and Nakanes' (1970, p.39) argument that being young, female, and/or foreign to Japan causes one to be considered 'worth less' in the Japanese society's social hierarchy? With a prominent national discourse on *karōshi*, are people actively or passively considering that a bonus or a shot at promotion is worth potentially costing a life, or at least somebody's mental and financial wellbeing?

Gambling on life insurance

Based on what I had been told, I revisited Duignan's findings from his medical anthropological exploration of the suicide situation in Japan across the 15-year span between 1997 and 2012. One major contributing factor to suicide rates across his period of study was that due to life insurance companies paying out for suicide deaths, there was a financial incentive to committing suicide. Though some people did take their own lives to alleviate financial pressures on their families, the majority of payouts were not to relatives or partners of the deceased. Instead, each year approximately "5000 people killed themselves, and life insurance policies were paid not to the families, but to consumer finance companies. Consumer finance companies were routinely taking out life insurance policies on borrowers. They never bothered to tell them, and a suicide was a win for a consumer finance company". He found that due to a severe lack of industry regulation, unethical methods for collecting on debts were common practice. He found that harassment of debtors' families and harassment at debtors' places of work was very common, and it was very common for debtors to be told to either pay their debts by extreme methods such as "selling eyeballs to eyebanks", or "sell[ing] kidneys for transplant use", or to take their own lives (Duignan, 2013; Saving 10,000 – Winning a War on Suicide in Japan, 2012). I followed up on his findings by speaking to a women's and minority rights advocate for a charity whose day job is in actuarial finance for a Japanese life insurance company. She said that the situation regarding consumer finance companies had improved significantly so that it would be very rare for them to attempt to take out a life insurance policy on a debtor any more. There are now rigorous checks in place and increased legislation to curb predatory practices and extortion from them. There is also a new industry standard so that although companies will still pay out for suicide deaths, it is common to have a clause in the contract with an exemption period of 12 or 24 months.

However, the shocking finding she mentioned quite nonchalantly is that the taking out of life insurance policies against somebody one has no relation to is both still legal, and still practiced. There is also no legal obligation to make the person the policy has been taken out against aware that the policy exists, or to inform bereaved relatives of a deceased person

that money has been paid out from a policy. I asked her for an approximation of the payout for a suicide death of a woman aged 18-39. She said that a policy on a healthy woman under 40 will generally result in a payment in the region of three million yen upon her death. I pushed and asked what kinds of people were having life insurance taken out on them, and by whom. She answered that these cases were divided into three cohorts:

-The smallest cohort was the cohort which usually got declined at her company, but she suspected other companies accepted these applications. Though she could not be certain as to the applicants, she believed that this group consisted of married people, especially men, who had policies taken out on them by loan sharks and criminals who would then threaten their safety, job security, and/or family. She estimated these kinds of applications to only number a few hundred per year.

-The second smallest cohort she believed to be middle-aged or older lovers and mistresses of high-salaried married men whose financial wellbeing was tied to the man who the policy would be brought out against. She believed that this group were mainly concerned that if the man were to die suddenly, they would struggle without the income from him, and that they were not of an age where they would be thought of as 'desirable' enough to find a new partner who would provide supplementary income to their living situation. She did concede that the man would often be involved in the application process on the condition of discretion. These applications she gave an unconfident guess at totalling maybe one or two thousand nationwide. She said they were usually approved. No safeguarding or other issues were raised in these cases that she could recall regarding the 12–24 month exemption period on payouts for suicide deaths.

-The largest cohort by far, which she said might be in the tens of thousands nationwide were young, low-income workers, whose bosses would take out life insurance policies on them and favour shorter exemption periods for payouts on deaths by suicide. Again, these applications were usually approved. I asked if the employees knew about the policies being taken out against them. She said that she didn't know, but she doubted that the employees were notified. She added that due to the age and low income of those the policies were taken out against, it would be incredibly cheap to take these policies out. She estimated the

cost at "maybe the same as Sukiya's '*gyudon setto*'" (a rice and beef meal with a raw egg and a small side salad served at a cheap chain restaurant) would cost. I asked her if there would be anything stopping a supervisor or manager from taking these policies out on their staff and then putting them at risk of *karōshi* through *pawa-hara* or *sekuhara*. She said, "no", and, in fact, she was sure it happens.

After our conversation, I sought to obtain a reference of monthly costs of holding a policy against an individual in Japan. In July 2022 I called the call centre of Kakaku, a large Japanese insurance comparison company, with a hypothetical enquiry. The quotes below detail the cost range per month in yen of policies with payouts in the millions of yen by age and gender cohort according to the Kakaku agent.

Age	Male	Female
20-24	900-960	530-571
25-29	910-943	560-651
30-34	974-1068	710-846
35-39	1220-1378	1010-1106
40-44	1770-1925	1300-1463

Table 4: Costs associated with life insurance policies in Japan

The data and conversations from this research point to a macabre form of gambling being undertaken in some Japanese offices. This is a gamble in which death equals a jackpot, and the gamble can be rigged in one's favour by means of abuse. For suicidologists, this can be taken not simply as an indication of a blight on Japanese workplaces, but as a way to work backwards from these policies and advocate for workplace audits of companies where their lower-level employees are having policies taken out against them. In this, so-called '*burakku kigyou*' can be identified and their practices scrutinised with a view to enacting targeted legislature.

Matsuri Takahashi as a symbol of *karōshi*

On Christmas Day 2015, 24-year-old Matsuri Takahashi died by suicide. Her suicide was ruled by a Tokyo court to be a product of stress and depression from overwork, citing her recent interactions and social media posts as evidence of workplace abuse by her older male *shachou* and *kaichou* (higher ups) who forced her to work more than 105 hours of unpaid overtime in the month leading up to her death. A week prior to her death she posted on her personal Twitter account, "when you spend 20 hours a day at the office, you no longer understand what you're living for".

It is the desperation juxtaposed with the humanity behind her coping mechanisms that captured national and international media attention. She became a figurehead for the image of *karōshi* and the strength of its connection to workplace abuse. Using Twitter as an outlet, she tweeted regularly enough for the media, including reporters for newspapers and news programmes to create a timeline of her mental health's deterioration and her mistreatment within her workplace (McCurry, 2017b; BBC News Japan, 2019). Ironically the NHK (Japan's national broadcaster) would later be discovered to have been internally investigating its own issues of workplace bullying resulting in widespread suicidal ideation and recorded fatalities at the same time they were criticising advertising giant and Miss Takahashi's employer prior to her death, Dentsu. The NHK's scandal involved a 31-year-old employee whose bosses bullied her into working 159 hours of overtime in the month before her death by heart failure. The judge in Miss Takahashi's suicide inquest, Tsutomi Kikuchi, opted to go on record in a press conference after the trial, saying that "illegal long working hours [are] becoming the norm," and that "overtime work without payment [is] rampant" in Japan (McCurry, 2017a).

To pick up on Bakuhatsu's point that knowing other women who were attempting or considering suicide due to abuse within the workplace who were "just like" her, seeing them within their friendship groups, and hearing their stories, made it seem like abuse was "inescapable" if you are a young woman. Her phrasing had troubling consistencies with both Duignan's summary of the thought process that goes into *karōshi* caused by workplace

abuse: “I am being bullied by my boss; I am being forced to work these terribly long hours[…] I just want to get out” (Saving 10,000 – Winning a War on Suicide in Japan, 2012). It has further parallels with the linguistic choice of the vloggers who talked about having suffered extensive abuse. The latter, instead of any word that directly means ‘suicide’, chose instead to use the word ‘*nigetai*’ extensively again and again. ‘*Nigetai*’ is the volitional adjective form of *‘nigeru*’ – ‘to escape’. Regarding both the situation of abuse they were suffering, and their state of ‘being alive’, the wording was the same – ‘*nigetai*’ - “I want to escape”. *Bakuhatsu* had pointed out though, to ‘escape’ is not as simple as changing jobs when abuse is so widespread that it is almost expected at another company, and even within intimate partner relationships, just the same. Therefore, the only sure-fire way to escape the abuse which would guarantee you are no longer going to be abused is to end your life. There is no guarantee of escaping abuse by changing jobs or finding a new partner. When I asked a volunteer for a Tokyo-based suicide prevention project for his thoughts on this phrasing, he shrugged and bluntly said, “I want to escape; I want to die. It’s all the same. It’s easy to understand, right”.

This might go some way to explaining the situation regarding Miss Takahashi and how so many of the ideating vloggers expressed an emotional connection to her and a deeper empathy to her situation. Separately, two vloggers each said that although Takahashi’s mother had spoken to her on Christmas Eve and urged her to quit her job if it was causing her that much stress, neither her mother nor the reporters who covered the case truly understood one fundamental thing: to Miss Takahashi and their minds’, quitting would not mean an end to abuse. It would only pause it until she inevitably had to go back to work at another company which was unlikely to have a fully healthy work culture. The only true way to escape that inevitability was to do as she did, and take her own life.

Overall, there is very clear evidence that abuse being suffered disproportionately by young women is contributing to a climate of gendered financial insecurities with a wage gap of 22.1% averaged over the last five years (OECD, 2022). Systemic inequalities create an environment with a lack of accountability, that at-times even gives kickbacks to reward abuse by bosses. While such environments exist, stress, fear, anxiety, depression, and PTSD

among other comorbidities for suicidal ideation from exposure to mental, physical, and sexual harassment and assault are both being formed and gradually exacerbated.

Evolving Ideas of ‘Femininity’ in Dispute

“In the US, strong women are seen as cool. In Japan, we’re taught to be obedient”.
– Advocate member of No Youth No Japan – Interview for the BBC (Oi, 2021)

“When I think back, I think what we wanted to say then, if only there were a way of saying it, is that there are deeply culturally engrained stereotypes that, if you break them, you will receive punishment from society. Have you heard of the phrase ‘the nail that sticks out gets hammered down’? […] They teach it to us in schools. They thought we would not want to be the nail. But our generation, right, our generation we have realised that the nail’s ability to cut can become a weapon. [...] Especially older men do not like that we nails will cut them. We like it though. We like that once they are cut on our nails once, twice, however many times, they slowly become unwilling to touch us [she beams in pride]. When the hammer, that is to say, patriarchy, slowly becomes damaged because there are *that* many nails to strike, they will worry about striking with it. It might break, see. It is said that we are fragile. Personally, I do not believe it. Individually we are. Together [though], twelve million nails are stronger than a hammer. Twelve million nails can break a hammer”.
– The same advocate member in a follow-up interview for this study.

This section of the analysis of findings seeks not to answer, but to question. What does it mean to be a woman in modern Japan? If there is a set, defined, hegemonic ideal, how does Japanese society react to creative expression and deviance from this ideal? Are these ideals being challenged? If so, who by, and in what ways? Does pressure to look a certain way; be a certain way allow for one to establish a sense of who they are – their own identity? When it does not, is there a growing intolerance to conservative ideas about ‘a women’s place’ in Japanese society?

Good wife, wise mother

To understand how ideas around what it means to be a young woman in Japanese society have evolved to become what they are today, I initially thought that the traditional '*ryōsai kenbo*' or 'good wife, wise mother' paradigm that has spread throughout East Asia from the its first coinage by Japanese scholar Nakamura Masanao in 1875 (Cherry, 1987, pp.48-49) might be a good place to start with the literature. According to several informants it persists as an idea and paradigm but is incredibly antiquated and the idea of the 'housewife who takes care of the household and the children' is very much a concept of the past being rejected by modern women both for reasons of preferring the financial stability of a dual income household and for the reason that the works and ideas of Japanese feminist scholars and activists the likes of Mitsu Tanaka, Raichō Hiratsuka and Fusae Ichikawa (cf. Tanaka, 1972; Kuninobu, 1984, pp.2-21) are becoming more prominent in the minds of young women.

While Japan has had its own suffragette and feminist movements over the course of the past century, the forms and ideas behind these have not always been consistent with the ideas behind Western waves of feminist movements[10]. Feminist movements have not been featured in my interviews in any form more notable than brief mentions, with the most substantial discussion coming from a mental health advocate confused about Mitsu Tanaka's theories of finding female empowerment through forced birth (cf. Tanaka, 1972, p.94). Therefore, lacking much relationality between discourses on suicide and the evolution of Japanese feminist theory in any testimonies, I was forced instead to re-evaluate what suicide can mean to ideating women on a more complex and individual level in the context of a potential redefinition when considered as "a destruction of the female self", as one advocate put it.

[10] For example, Mitsu Tanaka led feminist activism against the right to abort one's pregnancy as she deemed 'removing a symbol of a woman's 'natural purpose' to be disempowering to women.

Les fleurs de mal

The *yamato nadeshiko* a species of dianthus with the latin nomenclature, '*dianthus superbus'*) paradigm, so-named as a floral metaphor for a woman who has characteristics making her a "personification of an idealised Japanese woman" (Kakihara, 2013, pp.5-7) with "pure, feminine beauty" brings us a conceptualised image of demure, "child-like" women being "desirable" both sexually, and within the home and family units, especially if they are weak and fragile; needing "taking care of". Its combination kanji (大和撫子) roughly translates as 'caressable child'. It has been seen as a traditional ideal for a marriage partner in Japan (Hartley, 2004).

It is of note that in Japanese colloquial linguistics, seedier areas known to be rife with female prostitutes, sexual solicitation services, sexual massage parlors, and/or 'soaplands'[11] are often called *'hanamachi'*, a combination of the kanji '花', meaning flower , and '街', meaning village. They are, as perhaps an undeservedly poetic metaphor, 'villages in which one can pick flowers', or areas in which one might 'pick up' women. The process of picking up a woman from an area such as this to go elsewhere and engage in intercourse is referred to in Japanese slang as '*omochikaeri*', the same as 'to pick up a takeaway meal'. After having elucidated on multiple ways that women are casually referred to with the implication that they are different objects, one interviewee, choosing the pseudonym 'Aki', joked: "yes, what object am I today? It's a game show. Let's spin the wheel, haha", in a pastiche mockery of American television.

Aki – "Men make us become flowers because flowers are pretty. They like pretty things. But flowers need water, food, attention. If you do not give these, they will die. Men want to pick the flowers but they would rather pick a new flower than keep the flowers they have picked alive".

[11] Definition: "Soaplands are adult-only bathhouses offering customers both erotic washing services as well as sexual services. While prostitution is officially illegal in Japan, the domestic adult entertainment industry took advantage of legal loopholes to work around this ban" (Statista Research, 2022). The National Police Agency classes these as illegal, and keeps records of them, but does not actively enforce any countermeasures against them (*Keisatsu-chō,* 2022, p.12).

Interviewer - “By alive you mean...”

Aki – “I mean alive - not dying. I mean not suicide. I mean they want the pretty flowers. They want to use the pretty flowers but they do not give the time. They do not listen if we say we are withering. They throw us away [she uses the word ‘*suteru*’, usually used to refer to throwing away rubbish, or among women as a metaphor to refer to breaking up with (or throwing away) an emotionally abusive boyfriend in an abrupt, uncaring way]. Then, we die. We do it by ourselves. [...] The most dangerous virus is not coronavirus. It is this kind of way of thinking. It is dangerous and it infects easily”.

I asked Aki whether floral metaphors were still part of a discourse on what forms idealised femininity takes in today’s Japan, given that the ‘*yamato nadeshiko*’ paradigm was surely becoming antiquated. She disagreed and had the idea instead that there was a generational intolerance for it among the younger, more politically progressive cohort of Japanese society, but also that it is an ideal that is still often thrust upon the young by older generations, and especially by men who fetishise the idea of weakness and fragility in younger women. She listed a few of these as a challenge to herself to see how many she could list that she had heard used in her life. I verified the meanings later on with definitions from a source written by an English native speaker but agreed with 15 Japanese native speakers, and published by Kodansha, a Japanese academic publisher (Cherry, 1987, p.13).

Term	Meaning
Ryōute ni hana	Lit: Flower in both hands. “A man seated between two women[...]. Originally, it simply meant ‘doubly blessed’” (p.36).
Shokuba no hana	Lit: Workplace flowers. “An ornamental variety of office lady. A woman of any age can be an office lady, while *office flowers* must be young enough to serve as decorations for brightening and softening the predominantly masculine office environment” (p.105).
Tsubomi	Lit: Flower bud. A synonym for ‘virgin’, with the implication of youth. While in English linguistics ‘deflowering’ is regarded as the act of taking somebody’s virginity, Japanese linguistics regards virgins as ‘buds waiting to “burst into full blossom”’ for a man during their first experience of heterosexual intercourse (pp.35-36).
Adazakura	Lit: Ephemeral or scattered sakura. An archaic synonym for a woman touched by many men or a female prostitute (p.36).

Table 5: Floral colloquialisms for women (Cherry, 1987).

As an act of rebellion, with the high prevalence of the character ‘花’ (*hana*, meaning flower) in Japanese women’s names, Aki believed that many women with names containing the character that she was encountering in her advocacy were opting for nicknames for reasons of defiance. She believed that rejecting the idea of being regarded as, or called, a ‘flower’ empowers women; that this rebellion in the rejection of names was a show of “’I am not your flower. I am a real person. Treat me like a human. Talk to me as a human’”. She believed that this is a modern rebellion against an objectification which leads women to feelings of worthlessness. I asked her about the vloggers who said attempting suicide was easy because they were not killing a human to their mind, because the human was already dead. She responded, “I can believe it. But this is why I cheer on this rebellion. I can properly see that this fight is not a fight against a name. It is a fight against becoming an object. If you become an object, it is not different to being dead. This is a fight against suicide. Are you understanding me?”. After this, she stared at me through my screen with eyes imploring me to listen and understand.

The transcript shows me that Aki's silent stare lasted less than 15 seconds. At the time it felt like minutes. I will admit that a sudden sense of guilt overcame me and paralysed me. My partner too had rejected her name and gone by a nickname. She too had had 'hana' in her name; felt like a 'flower' in a *hanamachi*. With me she had not wanted to be called her birth name which had been a floral metaphor she explained to me her parents had given her in the expectation she 'lived up to her name'. They had obviously meant in a way unlike the flowers in the *hanamachi*, ready to be taken home by anyone who could pay the *hanadai* (flower fees – money paid for services from a sex worker). I had not understood her at all.

Keeping my personal life apart from the interview for professionalism's sake, I broke the silence by responding, "suicide is a complex thing". Aki was clearly disappointed in me. She visibly deflated in her seat, then said, "you just need to listen. It is not difficult. The flowers are loud. Look properly. The flowers' tears are many. Dew and tears are different. Do not just look at flowers and think 'there is a lot of dew'. Our parents do that. They are mistaken".

Aki's depth of thought and poetry challenged me to write this chapter. If gendered expectations on women to 'cull' the parts of what makes them *them* are responsible for the death of passions, respect of them as a fellow human, and their feelings of selfhood; if even within Japanese society the actions of a youth in rebellion are being disregarded as merely creating nicknames, then surely we scholars of depression, gender politics, and suicide need to start listening more properly as Aki demanded. We need to hear the flowers when they cry and treat them as human beings embroiled in this dual identity forced upon them by the discourse about them that reaches their ears - that they are but objects by one metaphor or another. We need to look at the dew and see it not as beautiful but as sad. Just as the women cried in their videos and left the footage in when posting it for all to see, whether that is for effect or for the sake of adding poignance to a creative product or not pales in relevance to why those tears existed in the first place.

As for flowers' further relevance to the medical anthropology of Japan's youth, another informant from a women's mental health advocacy encouraged me to look into '*hanahaki*' as a precursor to suicide for women fed this ideal that they should only partner with a man

who is “taller than she is” and has a “secure, well-salaried job in a good company”, or simply have been born into wealth. She chose the pseudonym ‘Eren’. She said it was fitting as it is the name of the main character from the ‘*Shingeki no Kyojin’* manga, who has the famous line ‘*Tatakae. Tatakae. Tatakae*’, meaning ‘Attack! Attack! Attack!’ with the implication of bringing a fight to an enemy. Romantic images of suffering for love of someone deemed ‘inappropriate’ by society, or who spurns their affections might make suffering until death become like a fantasy from a romantic novel or manga designed for self-insertion.

Interviewer - “Could talking about having become infected with *hanahaki* be a warning sign of more serious mental health concerns in your opinion”?

Eren – “To tell you the truth, I don’t know[...] but there’s definitely something fatalistic about it. It’s a terminal illness. It’s rejection-sensitive I suppose. It’s painful and it’s like being trapped, destroyed from the inside out by your own uncontrollable emotions. [...] There’s a desperation to it, a visceral suffocating image, loving and not being loved in return[...] And this awful painful thing being contrasted with something [as] beautiful and delicate as flowers”.

Interviewer – “There seem to be psychosomatic responses to this, yes”?

Eren – “I’ve only seen and heard from people ‘suffering’ it. I am a recovering weeb at best. This shit has been around ages but I think the first manga is from 2009. Tragic love always gets the fangirls going”.

Researching its origins, I found that ‘*Hanahaki*’ is a fictional disease caused by unrequited love, with often psychosomatic symptoms in its real life ‘sufferers’ of being restricted from breathing because in their minds, flower petals are sprouting in their lungs and blocking their airways (Taylor, 2020, p.53). Eren said that its origin is uncertain, but the basis of its imagery came from a manga called ‘*Hanahaki Otome*’, which roughly translates as ‘The Girl Who Chokes on Flowers’ (Matsuda, 2000). She sent me the following image to illustrate what she meant:

Figure 2: A double-page depiction of 'hanahaki' (Matsuda, 2000, pp. 23-24)

Looking at the image together, Eren took a moment for reflection.

Eren – "Hmmm. Kinda forgot it was a body horror thing. It's never presented like that you know. People present it as being beautiful and romantic. I remember people making mood boards about the kinds of flowers they imagined, [and] K pop, J pop stans[12] throwing up for their unrequited loves. I remember thinking the whole thing was silly but understanding the beauty in it.

Interviewer – "There are people legit [sic] throwing up flowers for meaning?

Eren – "No not people actually throwing up flowers, but they, like, don't focus on the horror aspect of it. Oh gosh we're deep in fandom territory. Things begin to make less sense out here".

[12] ['K Pop stans' is a slang term that can refer to a K pop/J pop band member who is the object of fans' obsessions, or the obsessed fans themselves]

Interviewer – “But it’s gendered”?

Eren – “Oh absolutely. Go back to who generally gets taught *ikebana* and all the deep meanings in what the flowers mean and it’s no surprise at all that the meanings women are taught are then reused elsewhere when women express their emotions”.

Ikebana is a somewhat old art form, having been first introduced to Japan by Chinese missionaries intending it to be a Buddhist practice of thoughtful floral tributes to the Buddha in the sixth century. ‘*Ikenobō’*, the first school of flower arranging in Japan was founded in the seventh century. *Ikebana* takes the form of flower arranging, with each flower having a different meaning within the practice (Nakamura, 2006, pp.1260-1261). While many of the meanings behind the flowers in *ikebana* can be tied to death and funerary practices, this may be being overlooked by advocates as important in the suicidal women’s journeys of searching for meaning and poetry in their darkest thoughts. Perhaps the suicidal women, in their search for meaning, are revisiting books and educational resources in order to reconceptualise their darkest thoughts within a framework related to floral meanings of death and funerary practices they have seen before. Perhaps it helps them to visualise death not in the image of their bodies post-suicide, but in a beautiful art form their funerals might inspire.

The data I collected is insufficient to give any of these kinds of answers, and due to this study’s ethical constraints, I cannot ask suicidal women directly to elaborate on their relationships with death and flowers. A male suicide prevention group secretary mused that he did not understand *ikebana*, but because his office is located close to a huge rose garden, he would sometimes hear flowers being used to describe feelings in metaphors that other words could not express. He likened hearing these metaphors to reading a translation of Baudelaire’s ‘*Les Fleurs de Mal’* (‘*Aku no Hana*’ in the Japanese translation) (cf. Baudelaire, 1857). He believed that just as Baudelaire in France created his own personal meaning in poetry to come to terms with his own depression, in a Japanese context, flowers and poetry

can come to mean something culturally inspired which can, in turn, affect modes of communicating distress.

The body politic in discontent

'Rose' (pseudonym) works for a Japanese government agency. She has been in a role formulating Japan's image abroad as a 'next stage' in the evolution of late Prime Minister Abe's 'Cool Japan' strategy (cf. Government of Japan Cabinet Office, 2022). Her love of Japan expressed through her work and her advocacy has not been sufficient to make her want to return to Japan to work in the Tokyo office she could transfer to.

Interviewer - "And what were these more prevalent ideas about gender roles"?

Rose - "I've been told that the way I spoke Japanese sounded too much like a man and not, like, not feminine enough. Uh, or that. I guess this is very big stereotype. I do lots of training in the gym that that was sort of, you know, not necessarily [she emphasised] *for men*. It's for my mental health. Uh, and the men say in like a jerky way 'but that's a bit '*kimoi*'[13]. But I was like, 'wow, that's, um, *interesting*'".

She highlighted the issues of women feeling depressed, with a low mood and low energy to go out and socialise, which might contribute to the ease at which one might become withdrawn from society and start to experience social isolation, and added that stigmatisation of bodies which do not fit the mould of what might be a general beauty standard could provoke fear in a lot of women that they will be bullied.

'Miki' (pseudonym), a mental health advocate, had attested that a lot of women she talked to in her role were developing agoraphobic symptoms as a precursor to fully fledged depression as a serious comorbidity, often also alongside social anxiety as a result of insecurities about the way they look. She said that even before the pandemic struck, many

[13] *Kimoi* is a Japanese slang term meaning the quality of leaving those one interacts with with a feeling of disgust. It is a contraction of '*kimochi warui*', a 'bad feeling'.

women had anxiety about their appearance to the extent that they would refuse to even visit a convenience store to buy groceries without a '*datte masuku'*, which is a physical mask one might wear for the purposes of covering one's face (sometimes as an alternative to wearing makeup), rather than for hygiene reasons. She blamed rampant airbrushing of images of women, the over-platforming of media featuring extremely ectomorphic women, and a multitude of other different smaller systemic reinforcers rather than one overarching affecter for what she described as a growing culture of lowered self-worth if impossible beauty standards could not be reached, resulting in depression and feelings of worthlessness to the world.

Miki - "And this kind of idea that women, like you go to a restaurant, you have sort of the set menu and then you have the women's menu, sort of implication that women are gonna eat less and we're, you know, want to be in a kid's body. Thin and like petite and helpless. But thing is Japan's changed since these stereotypes were made. The bubble economy where a dad can work full time and take care of everyone has passed. Women can't be fragile. We need to take care of ourselves but society doesn't, um, like that? You know? Like we have to be fragile and, um, dependent? But dependent on who? No one cares about women so no one cares for us".

The literature on gender and the body in contemporary Japan has much to say on how conformity to one societal standard or another can change whose worldviews and voices get raised and platformed. Noguchi (2004, p.8) summarises this discourse thus: "at the heart of [Japanese] culture lies a certain view of the body, and this view decides which perceptual experiences the culture chooses to value". Given this, is there a disenfranchisement that comes along with non-conformity to societally reinforced gender norms for bodies? It is almost fully paradoxical that those living in "petite", "helpless", "kid-like" bodies are those receiving platforms in a widespread media curated by a suffocating patriarchal ideal. By this logic, to have social power is to lack physical power and to have physical power is to lack social power to have one's issues heard if you are a woman in contemporary Japan. In addition to this, there is a very clear proven link between weight stigma and suicide risk (Brochu, 2020, pp.1979-1980; Kim et al, 2016).

Single incomes

As for a second pertinent point Rose made about the real-world implications of this disconnect between expectations of dependency and the economic viability of survival under such models, Rose said "a reason that there's a declining birth rate is because it is simply not sustainable to have like one income, especially if you're living in Tokyo". Women in the newest generation to the workforce appear to have to be able to overcome a hegemonic standard of the bubble era of Japan's fiscal history, for which the economic context is long dead - that men will provide for them in order to meet certain markers for success. With 46.4% of the suicidal vloggers (including 84.6% of the V1 group – those who described their experiences of living with depression and/or suicidal ideation) directly saying that they felt like failures in the context of a direct open monologue about suicide within their cohort, a real, frank discussion about what the expectations upon young adults of 'what success looks like' and its actual attainability to low-income adults is increasingly urgent in regards to its effect on mental health outcomes.

The Romanticisation of Non-Monogamy

What then does this mean for ideas of success in Japanese society in intimate partner relationships? *Ren'ai* (love marriages) were seen by Hendry (1981, pp.147-148) and Koelher (1983, p.19) in the 1980s to be symbols of empowerment. However, there was nothing in the data I have collected to suggest that empowerment is being sought through the pursuit of a *ren'ai* today. Conversely in fact, there was a general feeling among the advocates that marriage's[14] place and importance in modern Japan has turned it into being a task to fulfil so as not to be deemed 'a failure'.

[14] Here I write only of heterosexual marriages. Japan is yet to recognise same-sex marriages or marriages involving non-binary people while correctly gendering them in records.

These situations are often very complex and individual. As an illustrative case study, from the V3 group was a married woman appearing to be in her early 30's who described herself as having "already died" because she did not see life progressing or changing in any meaningful way, thinking that no companies would want to hire her for a well-paid position and she did not have the money or language skills to search for work abroad. Given her husband's affinity for prostitutes he would visit in love hotels close to his office during his lunch breaks and after work, she had taken that as an indication that exclusivity was not a predicate of their marriage, so she also sought romantic encounters with younger men and women outside of her marriage in an attempt to find an escape from the *ennui.* She described growing feelings of worthlessness at feeling used for sex, with none of her suiters having plans to move her in with them or take her on trips. So, she saw the only source of feasible escape from the *ennui* to be suicide, prompting her to attempt to die by hanging.

Another vlogger (V2) described wanted to show a desire to "die together" (even if not in old age) with a man she liked romantically in order to prove her love to him. Given that he was not in a sufficiently high-paying job, and his job security was under threat from the pandemic conditions, she realised that the only way she could continue to see him was if she was married to another man (she remarked that he would likely be significantly older than her), who was more financially stable. Being forced to see men she was not interested in romantically was one of the reasons she listed as to why she felt so depressed. She had offered to commit a joint suicide with her romantic interest, and he had talked her out of the attempt.

I recalled Tammy's[15] words when I was analysing a transcript from one of the V2 group vloggers who appeared to be around her mid-twenties. The transcript had a description of this vlogger's hatred for the 'Christmas cake analogy' known to many of her cohort. This is a misogynistic joke-saying predicated on 'play-on-words' humour whereby women are compared to Christmas cakes '"because no one wants them after the 25th " (birthday for sex and/or marriage in the case of the woman, or day of the month in the case of the cake)'.

[15] Tammy is an unmarried, polyamorous, Korean lawyer in her late 20's, living and working in Japan.

Tammy - “I hear that Japanese women get pressured into marriage a lot by the society and by their families, that their biological clock and societal clock is somehow ticking and they have to get married by a certain age so as to not be deemed a failure by the society, and often marriage for them is just checking the box. So you just need to find somebody who checks the boxes to get married to formally and then they say that romance is considered completely separate from it. So, in Japan, from what I hear from Japanese girls, um, cheating is incredibly romanticised. Um, and extramarital affairs are often seen as the only way to have real, ‘*true’* love and romance, because marriage is definitely not the means to get it. So, they often feel relieved once they get married, because now, now that they've gotten that out of the way, they can finally look for love and romance[...]”.

So why is it that there is so much power in this expectation put on young women? Duignan’s interviews for the ‘Saving 10,000’ project which has since featured as part of the Japanese government’s national suicide prevention campaigns contains a helpful argument from a Japanese suicide specialist: “Again there’s this hierarchical, male chauvinistic society that's killing them, and repressing them”. But is this simply about repression and power? Tammy thought that modern men “definitely have deep seated insecurities about their masculinity and societal and economic position. And they tend to be very threatened by women who have more of it than they do. More status. More power”.

Anderson and Hills’ (1983, pp. 941-953) data on what they call informal “compulsory retirement” policies upon female employees’ marriages shows that there is a real harm to women’s career goals if they do choose to marry. They speculate that this discrimination is a result of assumptions that married women might be more likely to prioritise their family life over the company, or take extensive maternity leave, causing disruption to their work life.

However, it must also be noted that their data also shows a consistent trend of barriers to progression for both older married women, and married women with no plans to procreate. If expectations to marry young or be deemed a “failure” by society is also a tool to repress women’s ability to succeed in their career goals, the ‘catch 22’ causing ‘feelings of failure’ to be such a major theme in the vloggers’ testimonies becomes more apparent.

To give a comparison from male behaviour observed by Matsunaga (2000) during her fieldwork in the Japanese retail industry, she reported that even unmarried men would wear wedding rings to give the appearance that they were "more trustworthy" to customers (as a woman trusts him enough to marry him), and that they would be "loyal to the company" to their bosses (with the assumption that married men would prefer financial stability and be less likely to move their families to a new location in order to switch companies). While men would pretend to be married for their careers, women would pretend to be unmarried and have no plans to marry.

Gendered roles in non-heteronormative relationships

My past work on the lived experiences of Japanese self-identified queer women pushed me to critically consider popular understandings and criticisms of the phenomenon popularity of *BL* (boys love) *manga*, *sabukaru* (youth subculture) and animation (Trusson, 2019). The former study helped me to see from the perspective of the predominantly young female Japanese customers of materials depicting homosexual sex and romance between men, wherein a key finding was that while these women told me they accepted that the existence and 'sex sells' marketisation of these materials might have implications for fetishisation, they believed it important for '*nigerukoto'* – 'escapism [implied: via fantasy]' from the realities of life, and at that, a healthier form of escape than the 'escape via death' that they reported their friends within their age cohort within Japanese LGBT spaces spoke about. With the pressures from family, feelings of '*giri*', or 'duty' to do right by traditional expectations, in addition to the lack of marriage equality despite widespread advocacy for it from many of the minority rights advocacy groups I have interacted with, in addition to many other factors, they could not see themselves ever being able to survive while settling down with a partner of their preferred gender or breaking from traditional expectations of monogamy which might not match the relationship model(s) they might choose had they the 'freedom' to do so without stigma.

A case study from the V2 group illustrates the impact of homophobia upon financially vulnerable women who, in same-sex relationships, potentially carried a doubled burden of

wage discrimination and barriers to career progression based upon their gender. A woman wanted to show her ex-girlfriend that she was more serious about her relationship with her than her relationship with her fiancé, a significantly older man whom she felt little desire for. She started to self-harm as an act of 'showing her love'. However, she conceded that they both realised that both she and her ex-girlfriend would have much better financial wellbeing and not face homophobic discrimination if they ended their relationship before the nature of it became public knowledge, and married men in stable company positions instead. She felt saddened by her lack of freedom. The self-harm by cutting continued.

Regardless of sexuality for women, depictions of relationships with men in which a female or other non-male-identifying love interest is treated as an 'equal' was deemed by both the prior study's interviewees and this study's interviewees to be (in one's words) "too unrealistic. I cannot imagine it". I followed up on this in the context of a line of questioning about the progression of relationship equality in an interview with an advocate from Stonewall Japan for the current study. "It would not happen", the representative said. "LGBT women, well, all women want to be held, right, want to be equal. [They] want to be treated with respect but that is not natural to see from a man like Japanese society expects them to, what is it now? Ah, become the partner to. Well, partner is a strange word [laughs]. In business, partners can be equal, right. With homosexuals, a partner can be equal. But wife – husband? Boyfriend – girlfriend"?

He trailed off with a facial expression as if he had bitten down on something unpleasant before continuing: "So these traditional roles, to break them and get the fantasy, ah [gesticulates], equality, ah, basically, well, first, you need to be men". He paused to think, then continued: "Men hold power. And the relationship that people who enjoy this kind of thing have with the BL is that they 'become' the *neko* or the *tatsu* [character roles within gay erotic fiction]. They ah, [checks an electronic dictionary application for a translation] 'self-insert'? Because then they have power too. Not *power* power. Just ah, power. No power - no equality. But women do not have power. If you imagine it, a woman having power, especially if she is a minority identity – *Barakumin*[16], LGBT, if they have a disability or

[16] *Barakumin* are mixed-race descendants of Korean immigrants who are often subject to discrimination in Japan.

if their head is ill, it is not realistic. So, they cannot see equality as realistic. A man and a man, equality is realistic". I asked, "so is the fetishism the fantasy, or is the equality the fantasy"? The representative laughed, "I'm a *ryoutoudzukai* [Japanese joke equating a swordsman with a preference for using more than one sword at a time to a bisexual person's sexuality including more than one gender at a time, or here to liking two things at once]. Whichever is good".

Summary

What is does it mean to be a woman and what is a relationship supposed to look like for women in modern Japan? Hana (pseudonym), a secretary for a student advocacy movement summarised the multifaceted nature of the gendered expectations:

"Men want them [sexually] to be '*ningyou'*. The government wants them to be incubators [for babies]. Their companies want them to be robots. They are not '*ningyo*u'. They are not incubators. They are not robots." *Ningyou* has many meanings: puppets, dolls the like of unmanned marionettes, or sex dolls. I asked her which she meant by this. She answered "'*nandemoii*'" - 'whichever'. The complexity of selfhood juxtaposed with the reductionism she hinted at was truly telling.

Means, Contagion, and Sacrifice

"Crisis read is crisis seen is crisis understood is crisis that can happen again".
- Representative for a Japanese suicide hotline (anonymised)

"Suicide is an idea, right. But the idea, right, it is a cancer. It infects. That person infected with this cancerous idea will be cut off from the body. That is to say, well the body is general society. No one wants to be the neighbouring cell and become infected. Like you would not sit next to someone with coronavirus on the train, right. Same sort of idea. So, society cuts the cancer-carrying cell out. You know, it is like a mastectomy from a cancerous chest but it does not cost any money. Then the suicidal person retreats to the internet and the ideas become a cancer there instead".

- Advocate for socialised mental health care in Japan (anonymised)

In this section, the argument must be made against limiting ethno-psychiatric models and modes of understanding suicide to only those which use established, over-medicalised, strictly scientific approaches to suicidal ideation as a result of a mental disorder in the individual. Instead, evidence is gathered towards an understanding that suicidal ideas can be a social contagion which manifests most virally in societies that do not treat suffering people. In this, I argue that any suicidal individual whose situation represents a failure of a society to be compassionate to them, as well as any factor known to be associated with heightened suicide rates must also be considered anthropologically as if the social condition it represents has the potential to manifest into a cancer which spreads cell-to-cell as suicide as a salient, community-driven phenomenon.

The Flaws in the Diagnostic Process

Dominant ideas around suicide have been built within medical psychiatry, especially within Japan, that depression and suicidal ideation are maladies of the individual carrying a diseased mind so treatment methods should be targeted at the 'diseased individual' (Kitanaka, 2012, p.94). After all, as much as ideas and discourses around suicide – what it means; what it looks like; what potential triggers it may have, acknowledge that the suicidal self is a self in a society of many selves. It is the individual, not the society in which these ideas and modes of discourse manifest. It is the individual who walks into a hospital or a clinic and asks to speak to a general practitioner about their mental health. It is the individual, not the society, who is picked up by an ambulance or by a mortician following a mental health breakdown or suicide attempt.

To posit Kral's (2019) theory of suicide, it can take a form of '*cultural memesis*'. This theory builds on many years of academic discourse on how ideas and meanings assigned to suicidal and self-destructive behaviours can be influenced by external factors. This understanding of the self is often in the language and context of the society one finds themself in. Suicidal

ideas can be inspired, as can be seen from Ueda et al.'s (2014; 2017; 2020) and Fahey et al.'s (2020) findings that suicide attempts with matching methodologies to deceased celebrities increase when news articles about that celebrity's suicide attempt and/or death are shared on Twitter, and especially in cases in which the story is sensationalised and seen as "shocking and unexpected" (Ueda, 2021a). This particular example of 'cultural memesis' is known as the Werther Effect, and has been noticed historically as technologies evolved. The first known case of this social phenomenon being attributed to actual suicide deaths was in 1774 when Goethe's novel '*Die Lieden des Jungen Werthers'* (The Sorrows of Young Werther) was published. Soon after that, a spate of suicide deaths arose whereby young men dressed similarly to the character of Werther, in "yellow pants and blue jackets", and killed themselves in the same way as Werther did in the novel – by shooting themselves with pistols (Fahey et al., 2020). Ueda (2021a;2021b) used only data from Japan in a time-series analysis to make her point in her presentations to the Daiwa Foundation at Japan House London, and the FCCJ to show why she and her colleagues at the University of Michigan and the Waseda Institute believe this phenomenon to be an active threat to Japanese suicide rates (ibid; Ueda, 2021b).

The Princess's death

I recall my perspective on the digital context of suicide in Japan changing in December after a personal acquaintance's death by suicide. Twitter was clearly changing the discourse around death and beautifying it in memoriam. Sayaka Kanda, a famous, up-and-coming film, television, and voice actress fell from a tall building on December 18th 2021 in Sapporo in a death ruled a suicide by Sapporo police (Yomiuri Shinbun, 2021). She was well-known for being the Japanese voice actress for 'Princess Anna' in Disney's 'Frozen', as well as her pop career as a recording artist for popular media. Kanda was well-liked by her fans and would often attend fan meets. We became friends eventually, as it was one of my late partner's pleasures in life to go to these fan meets and talk to other people interested in the same media that she was, so we took Kanda's LINE contact details and met up with her on a number of occasions.

After the suicide death was reported, there was an explosion of support and online pseudo-memorialisation on Twitter I observed which beautified her. I have been asked by informants as part of this study on suicide, different iterations of that one biting question: "have you lost anyone to suicide?". My personal life is my own and this is usually something I would politely decline to answer about, but I thought it relevant to answer that I was saddened by the loss of Miss Kanda. Whenever this interaction took place, the same sentiment my late partner had had in December while showing me her Twitter feed full of 'tweets' of bereavement which overwhelmed the feed for scroll after scroll was recapitulated "if someone like her who has everything cannot see a life worth living in this country, how can any other young woman who does not [have everything]". There was no talk of demons. There was no talk of mental illness. The comment was simply understanding the decision as something deeply personal, and yet paradoxically societal.

The meaning constructed by all of these Japanese informants as to why their fellow citizens decided to end their own lives was not one in which it was the 'natural result' of depression or ideation or an erratic mind. For women, they constructed suicide as a 'natural result' of simply living in Japan as a young woman. The society was at fault – diseased - not her mind. But then my late partner encouraged me to ask about the social media response to Miss Kanda's death if it came up naturally during interviews. Both she and four out of the five interviewees who discussed this with me believed the same: that online tributes to the deceased showed users who might already be ideating when viewing the social media response that they could turn their interactions with others in Japanese society and the online world from what might be disregard for their life while alive, to a transcendent beauty in death, memorialised in pixel writings of reverence such as those in Figure 3. These tweets were not read by the deceased. They were read by the living. And the living might understand this process of online memorialisation as an offer of beauty for death.

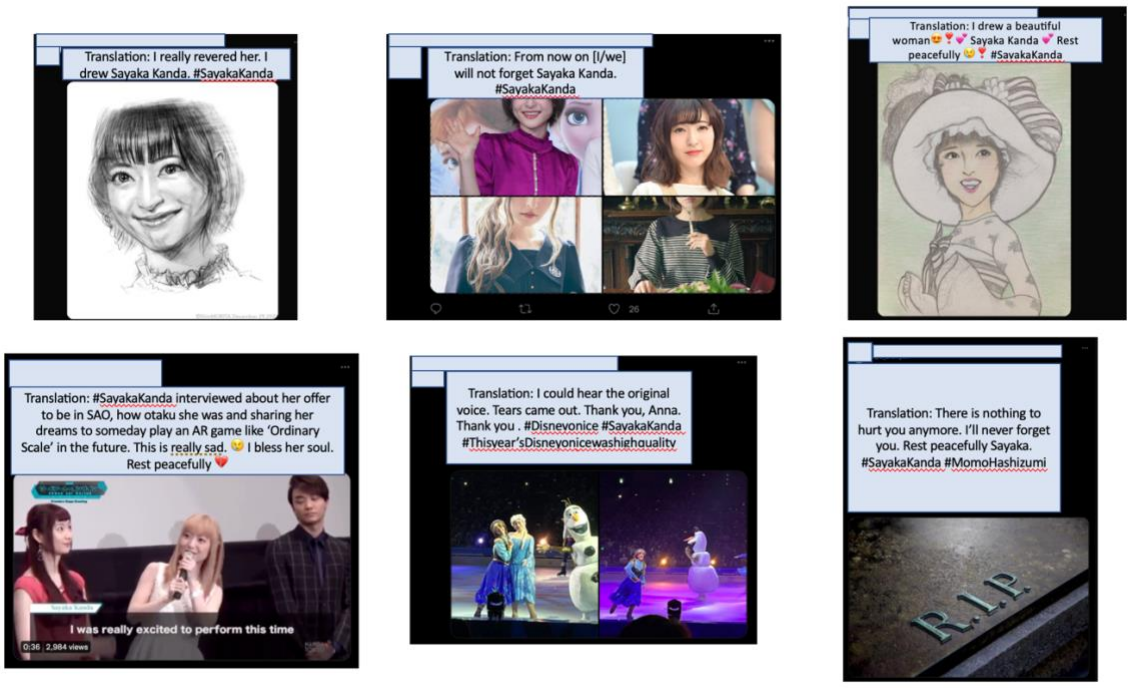

Figure 3: A translated selection of anonymised tweets containing the hashtag #神田沙也加 (romaji: #kandasayaka) posted the day her death by suicide was publicly announced. Retrieved from Twitter.

Dual selves

Tarde (1895) theorised that actions of an individual in society largely consist of learned behaviours turned from observation to memesis in a process of '*cultural imitation'*. From my study there has been much evidence both for and against this playing a role in how methods and motivations to commit suicide are chosen. To add to this, the digital ethnographic element to this study has opened up a reasonable case to be made that the self that exists on the internet, and the thoughts and personality that exists there is not always the same personality as exists in 'real life', even if the person that exists as fingers on a keyboard is *in theory* the same person as would hold a coffee or a loved one's hand on a park bench.

As an interviewee from '*Anata no Ibasho'* (lit: 'Your Place to Be', an internet mental health counselling service with a chatbox platform) put it, *t*he mind is different and the thoughts of where to go change from the digital realm of "I want to go to youtube" to *"I want to go to buy some kakigoori [a dessert consisting of shaved ice with flavoured syrup]*". This is an argument that, in different ways, three separate interviewees asked me to consider, rather

than one formulated organically through thematic analysis alone, so I feel obligated to analyse this argument critically.

Bourdieu (1986, pp.210-216) wrote of a "biographical illusion" falsehood whereby human existence, with its multiplicities of ideas around selfhood and constructed identity is falsely simplified into one idea of the one 'true self'. Suler (2002, pp.455-460) has also actively pushed the idea that a person's identity embodies multiplicity in cyberspace. This kind of constructed identity must be considered when reading content created by and concerning suicidal individuals. The vloggers as visual content creators, appearing themselves in their own content, must be read to have been acting in a performative role as people constructing a narrative for an imagined audience. Findings by Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons (2002, pp.33-46) suggest that social media and blogging platforms can become "virtual playgrounds" for experimentation with identity and a multiplicity of digital selfhood.

As one of the interviewees put it, the 'self on the internet' is different to the 'self in reality'. *"Tsuitta- no watashi ha sanjigen no watashi to chigaimasune*" – "the 'me' on Twitter is different to the 'me' in three dimensions". '*Sanjigen'* is also a slang term for 'in reality'. It is used make the distinction from being online. If the distinct 'self' in reality ceases to exist when online, and the created 'self' which might 'exist' as one's online presence ceases to exist when 'in reality', are not both selves in a state of flux between jarring binaries of non-existence and existence? If they are both distinct, are the ideas turning from observation to memesis in cultural imitation also acting distinctly upon each?

If this theory is correct, the interactions and influences and what one might be able to see are different in each 'state of being'. Then, when interacting with a media with very few legal restrictions past slander and defamation laws which have a corporate interest in 'cash for clicks' from advertising revenue, a battle for the most sensationalised, clickbait-style article can have deadly effects in a virility war for social networking services and news sites, says Ueda (2021a; 2021b). And especially when a celebrity has died by suicide and the journalists, as hungry as bloodhounds for the next viral scoop, will sensationalise their deaths - 'how "shocking and unexpected" this celebrity's death has been'. The danger of memesis is clear. Although the Werther effect only affects suicide fatality rates by any cause

by about a 5% increase over the course of approximately seven days, in the case of sensationalised news reports including details about the means of the suicide, the increase in interest in use of that same means increases by a much more statistically significant amount (ibid). All of the interviewed charities which were set up with the primary intention to be a point of contact for people at the time of crisis: *Inochi no Denwa*, Tokyo English Lifeline (TELL), and *Anata no Ibasho*, answered that they had seen a significant increase in the number of calls and messages from people considering suicide wherein they would talk about means or sites matching those of more famous suicides in days following online press attention for those suicides. However, as part of their de-escalation strategy, they found that an effective way of immediately relieving the intensity of the suicidal intent was to separate the person from their computer, distract them and have them go for a walk to "think clearly". The consideration of 'separating the selves' in this approach is apparent.

The mass-availability (available to all who could search the specific 'web search queries') of the online vlogging platform used, the higher production values, and the relatively high viewing figures for the V2 subgroup of vloggers has led to them being useful in the debate on what might be termed 'the idea of suicide as contagion', in the form of memetic ideas. Widger's (2014, pp.148-152) ethnography on the links between cultural factors and self-destructive behaviours in Sri Lanka revealed that whether they be 'deaths of despair' or self-rationalised decisions to harm oneself in a way that could prove fatal, ideas absorbed from wider societal ideas around these behaviours can be 'inspirational'.

Metrics for Success in Suicidal Ideas' Spread

What is important to understand about the effect of discourse around the idea of what suicide *is*, alongside its ideas and aesthetics, is that this can change with the aims and intent the creators of these depictions and ideas had, whether these creators are cognizant or not of what the secondary societal outcomes could be from others viewing these. The pursuit of virality could be argued to disincentivise following widely accepted media guidelines for reporting on suicide which have been regarded by many academics and professional bodies as lessening the risk of suicide for readers. These guidelines in one form or another are advocated for internationally in order to reduce the risk of memetic suicides (Samaritans,

2020, pp.3-13; The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 2021, pp.1-4; Michel et al., 2000, pp.71-79; Till et al., 2018; Niederkronthaler et al., 2010, pp.234-243; Gould, 2001, pp.200-224). Examples of how depictions might differ are:

- A journalist for a news site might gage metrics for success based upon advertising revenue scaling with views and clicks on their online article. It makes sense to make the stories about suicide as shocking and sensationalised as possible to 'grab the reader's attention'. It makes sense that they are made to seem like the most interesting thing one could click on in an internet filled with content. In doing so, virality of the article helps to increase clicks, making the article 'successful' under the metric of revenue potential, but also increasing the virility of the ideas and information it contains. If it contains information about means that have proven fatal to the deceased, more people would be pulled to the information about a 'tried and tested' method of committing suicide that clearly works. They are given information about how they too could die by suicide, which is dangerous information to give to somebody who could potentially already be considering suicide.

- A vlogger such as those whose stories have been included in a dataset for this study might make their situation and viewpoint more clickable with hyperbolised or search-engine-optimised words. The V3 group of vloggers stated their reasoning for creating content as in one's words "to show, what is it? I exist. Do not forget me. I am here", reminiscent of the fight against 'social death' (cf. Russell, 2008, pp.181-183). Therefore, some have reasoned that the more engaging and complicated, with more details of means and methodology of suicide practice, the more they will leave behind to show that they have existed; the higher the viewership, the more minds they will exist in to remember them and prevent their social death.

- An author might poeticise suicide if doing so has proven conducive to book sales. Examples include Yukio Mishima, who took the advice of Yusanari Kawabata in 1946 that 'suicide in novels sells' and made a name for himself as an author in his own right. His novels held trademarks of staunch nationalism and poetic descriptions of suicide as something beautiful, conducted out of love for one's country or others

who might benefit from it in Japanese Society (Mishima, 1963, pp.171-193). His novels '*Chūsei'* – 'The Middle Ages', '*Tabako*' – 'The Cigarette,' *'Tōzoku'* – 'Thieves,' and '*Yūkoku'* – 'Patriotism,' which feature themes of suicide as heroism, patriotism, love, and beauty were mentioned by different interviewees as having inspired suicides by similar methods or at beauty spots poeticised in the novels in death scenes, though his novels with themes of suicide are more numerous.

Mishima would go on to end his life in an anachronistic *seppuku* style by cutting his stomach open with a samurai sword after staging a coup of a government building in a show of patriotism. He made a speech with language reminiscent of the language used to poeticise suicide as 'beautiful sacrifice' in his best-selling books which he was mocked for by witnesses. It is believed that he died slowly and in agony due to his 'second' who was (following the traditional practice of *seppuku*), supposed to behead him to give him a quick death and save him from suffering, allegedly experiencing a breakdown during Mishima's attempt leaving him incapable of fulfilling these obligations (Ōe, 1972). The barbarism of media depictions of his actual death juxtaposed with his romanticism of the 'glory of ritual suicide' was credited by one interviewee as having marked the "death of *seppuku* as cultural practice" in Japan along with its growing anachronistic nature to modern day society.

Through all of these we can see that different persons involved in the dissemination of ideas around suicide have their own motivations, be they political, personal, financial, or in the pursuit of more complex objectives. The knock-on effect on discourses though is that the ideas disseminated are warping the very meaning of suicide from something deeply personal to something skewed by the intentions of the disseminator. Non-human disseminators too have been blamed for bringing sensation and exaggeration to suicide. A mental health advocate expressed her concerns over online algorithms exposing people with depression, self-destructive tendencies, and active and passive suicidal thoughts to extreme or overly-instructive articles which, in some extremely dangerous cases, give methodologies for committing suicide in depicting it. Algorithms do not have the human sensitivity not to present people at high risk of suicide with articles inclusive of methods or popular places one might go to kill oneself. They do however match up search terms and

information-seeking behaviours. This advocate raised concerns that others' online journeys from searches related to depression to those related to ideation to then finally information on how to effectively kill oneself then go on to inform the algorithm that someone at the early stage of such a journey should then be presented the information from further along it, thus increasing the speed at which dangerous information is accessed by at-risk groups. It is possible that suicide attempt trajectories are being artificially quickened by algorithm-matched websites and articles containing information about suicide methods which are more likely to result in fatality than if they had attempted to end their lives without such information.

Addictions

She did not worry only about the effect this might have on suicide rates. There was also a commercial interest she stated in algorithms targeting those recovering from gambling, alcohol, and tobacco addictions with advertisements for the objects of their addictions. She gave an example of a large beverage manufacturer in Japan (anonymised for legal reasons), which she alleged was currently facing a backlash from addiction support groups for buying advertisements for their beers and whiskeys targeted at people searching for terms related to recovery and self-help for overcoming alcohol addictions. Given the large proportion of spending an addict might allocate to the object of their addiction, ethically dubious as it may be, there is a real commercial interest in keeping customers addicted to your product.

The inability to stay sober has been strongly linked to risk of suicide by means related to one's vice. Alcoholics in Japan who choose to end their lives have tended to do so while drunk. In the case of self-inflicted death by drug overdose, most of the drug content in the deceased's system will tend to consist of a current or prior vice (Yakushin, 1998, pp.73-90). These trends must be considered critically due to the way that active or recovering addicts might have easier access to their vices than other substances, and both drug and alcohol consumption is linked with dangerous or reckless behaviour. Substance abuse carries common symptoms of "disinhibition, impulsiveness and impaired judgment, but it may also be used as a means to ease the distress associated with committing an act of suicide" (Pompili et al., 2010, p.1392).

This does not however explain that suicide risk from gambling and tobacco addiction recoverees sharply increases in periods after they have broken their sobrieties (Yakushin, 1998, pp.80-82). A possible explanation might be found in the vloggers' accounts of reasons for their suicide attempts, depression, and ideation. 'Feelings of failure' was a recurrent theme in the vlogs regarding self-reflection the about causes of their respective depressed moods. The word '*shippai*' (failure) occurred 14 times over 8 of the 28 analysed vlogs. The word '*dekinai*' (I cannot do it) occurred 22 times over 13 of the 28 vlogs. Intense pressure to succeed not just in life but in overcoming one's demons might be in some way responsible for feelings of hopelessness and despair leading to 'deaths of despair' when they feel their struggle against addiction has ended in failure (Case, 2020; Case and Deaton, 2020, p.212).

'Given' as a case study in how suicidal ideas spread

In Japan, 'hanging' constitutes almost three quarters of suicide fatalities for men and approximately half of suicide deaths of women (Ojima et al., 2004). Although dying a self-inflicted death by alcohol poisoning alone would be difficult, the rates of interactions Stonewall Japan has had with people with plans to attempt to end their lives by hanging while intoxicated sharply increased in the Summer of 2019. One of their representatives told me that they have seen an increase in crisis calls to their advice teams, and various other disclosures wherein they have ascertained that action plans for suicide attempts by this means had already started, with alcohol and sometimes also rope (though this was harder to come by) having already been purchased. The representative believed this to be somewhat down to the success of a romantic 'boys love' manga series which became a high-grossing anime series popular especially among young women and LGBT people both within Japan and overseas called 'Given', written by *mangaka* Natsuki Kizu, which depicted suicide by drinking to excess then hanging oneself as "easy", "beautiful", "poetic", and "something you do after a fight to show your *koibito* [(someone cherished whom one might see as a potential life partner)] that you love them".

Stonewall representative - "Crisis read is crisis seen is crisis understood is crisis that can happen again".

Interviewer - “But then, to say ‘crisis’, surely it has a negative image’?

Stonewall representative – “There are differences. Beautiful crisis, madness crisis, it is different. Do you go up to a beautiful heaven or do you fall down into a personal hell”?

Interviewer - “I do not understand at all. What do you mean”?

Stonewall representative - “The suicide means. If you properly consider the suicide means you will properly understand. People will copy the suicides they see as beautiful. There is nobody who wants to die in a way which is not beautiful [...]. The beautiful *koibito* in ‘Given’, ah what was his name, I forgot. The death was beautiful so that quiet character was inspired to be artistic and beautiful. It was a present that was ‘given’. It is normal for a *koibito* to give beautiful things. So, they die with beautiful means. If you attempt suicide and it is a mess of blood and pain, you give that pain, well, probably mental illness, what is it again? PTSD, I wonder? Instead of the beautiful thing”.

According to the interviewee, the same trend of calls related to copied methods came (even if to a lesser extent) previously in the wake of the popularisations of both the ‘*Jisatsu Sa-kuru*’ (‘The Suicide Club’) manga in Japan, and the ‘*Jasal Sonyeon*’ (Suicide Boy) manhwa in Korea. Learning from this, Stonewall Japan’s management changed their phoneline policy quickly, responding to feedback on the influx of drunk calls and consensus among staff as to why so many callers were intoxicated at the time of the call. They changed their policy from one in which a call handler should hang up the call if the caller was clearly too intoxicated to be coherent to one in which that call should be treated as a warning sign for more immediate triage to escalated support on the basis that the intoxication could be the “first step” of the copycat suicide process.

Beauty and pain

The idea of this false dichotomy of suicide as something "beautiful" versus something "painful" opens an avenue to explore some of the discourses involved in the way that the ideating vloggers engaged with ideas behind suicide's meaning and repercussions. How is it that such a dichotomised consideration of suicide can be made based solely on means? Surely there is something between pain and beauty, but re-reading the vlogs based on this new critique of meaning, cases in the dataset wherein there was an account of suicidal intent lacking in either the mention of beauty or pain ("*kurushi*" – 'tough/painful') were few.

Perhaps then, accepting that ideas around what is "beautiful", and what is "painful" are subjective can form a basis to understanding the gap between the meaning in the mind of a suicide attempter in the lead-up to an attempt, and its actual realised image to loved ones after the attempt. Assumptions that everyone sees 'beauty' and 'pain' in the same way are neither helpful nor sympathetic to individual feelings. A famous example of this difference between the meanings of suicide to the suicidal individual and the meanings of suicide when translated to popular Japanese society is the difference between actor, director, politician, militant, activist, and author, Yukio Mishima's writings and speeches on the 'beauty of suicide practice', and media reactions to his death by suicide (Hirata, 1990, pp.85-89). In no uncertain terms he was mocked for his "madness" by national broadcasters and spurned for having shirked responsibility for his pain, choosing instead to impose that pain upon his surviving loved ones, whereas he always spoke about suicide as having a personal meaning to him – one of beauty and loving sacrifice (ANN News, 1970; Chuunichi News, 1970).

Understanding suicide from a perspective of the transfer of pain is not difficult. It was also a concern for many of the vloggers, and they tended to use this perspective to negotiate with themselves in their internal dialogue in favour of living to see another day. For the vloggers who aimed their content at others considering suicide, an empathetic "*tsurai deshou*?" was a common message: "it's painful, right", with the implied meaning 'it is painful to continue on, and I can understand that as someone who is also in pain'. The importance of understanding a desire to die as being "painful" in conversations and psychiatric interventions with suicidal people is beginning to be recognised by Japanese clinical academics, though it is still under critical debate as to how this understanding can be

translated into clinical practice (Matsumoto et al., 2013, pp.198-203). By considering the idea that suicide can be a means to not have to suffer the “painful” state of living in the minds of these suicidal individuals, perhaps we can understand the non-physical “pain” these suicidal people refer to as their “social suffering” under Kleinman‘s (1990; 1997, pp.329-331) theory. Thus, clinical responses to the claim that ‘life is “painful”’ as a self-reported symptom of individual mental health struggles could be restructured to be more sympathetic to other factors that could be involved in social suffering (poverty, food insecurity, depression, etc.), by taking these claims seriously as involved factors outside of the mind. When suicidal people create content attempting to find others with similar stories of social suffering through empathetic appeals to understand their pain, and the respondents in the comment sections write testimonies of their struggles, this pain is clearly something bigger and more complex than can be applied to individual isolated mental states.

Erroneous positivism

When discussion of suicide as a sociological issue arises, the main port of call for official figures is to define a geographical area and timeframe, then to analyse the increasing or decreasing suicide rates within that area for trends. From a simplistic viewpoint, this suffices to indicate the level of severity of the current issue(s). In doing so however, two inherent issues arise.

Firstly, citing these rates in a positivist way leaves a great deal of room for error and misinterpretation. There can be no uniformity in post-mortem diagnoses of is or is not defined a ‘death by suicide’ when presentations are so varied. A famous retort to this is Atkinson’s (1978) ethnomethodological study based upon Douglas’ (1967) criticisms of the officially reported statistics. Douglas argued that official statistics reflect little more than the constructs and labels coroners and stakeholders in the post-mortem diagnostic process give to deaths (p163). He furthered his argument by saying that qualitative methods can allow anthropologists and sociologists to deconstruct these labels to find the socio-cultural and/or personal meanings of suicide to the deceased (pp.284-285). Decisions to report suicide as cause of death are taken by coroners and stakeholders in the suicide process. Their

interactions and social situations mean that the reconstruction of events surrounding the deceased's death can become prone to manipulation, challenging many of Durkheim's (1897, p.125, p.157) assertions such as that people with "high levels of integration are less prone to suicide", which Douglas criticised by saying that this assumes a lack of interference from those close to the 'well-integrated' individuals upon threat to their lives. Durkheim uses the example of people 'well-integrated' into the Christian church. "Religion protects man against the desire for self-destruction" (ibid). Douglas responded that surely in a religious culture in which suicide is seen as sinful, families and religious people acquainted with the deceased might manipulate the retelling of events surrounding the death to cover up the suicide, leading to figures being false due to lack of truthful verdicts rather than lack of suicide deaths (Douglas, 1967, pp.43-45). Overall, Douglas concluded that suicide verdicts and statistics are well-evidenced social constructs as opposed to inarguable facts.

Atkinson went further to test Douglas' theories by conducting ethnographic research in coroners' offices, reviewing the coroners' records and interacting with the coroners directly. He found very little evidence of properly formalised diagnostic criteria for declaring that deaths were suicides. Instead, he concluded that declarations of what constitutes a suicide death or not were highly socially influenced (Atkinson, 1978). More recently, Fujiwara (2012, pp. 63-73) performed a copycat study based on Atkinson's work, visiting coroners' offices in Kyushu, Okayama, and Tokyo in a multi-sited analysis of coroners' records and reporting processes. He concluded that suicide being reported as the official 'cause of death' mainly occurred in his fieldwork sites because filing processes are 'category-bound', and coroners were unable to complete the filing without a cause of death which could be neatly categorised. With suicide deaths' multitude of possible presentations, the processes around deaths being reported as suicides were often not significantly informed by social information unless police staff involved in the suicide process, and/or aftercare for the deceased's loved ones went out of their way to provide it, or a suicide note was left. He found much cause to be wary about the validity of official figures produced by Japan's National Police Agency for governmental white papers (Fujiwara, 2012, p.71).

As part of my research for this chapter, I asked an advocate in a related academic field about the possibility of gender biases in modern day post-mortem diagnoses. He responded

that although he could not say for certain, his observations during his fieldwork supported the idea that coroners and police officers tended to hold the idea that "suicide attempts are ineffective ways of women getting attention", whereas it is "manly to kill yourself". This, he said, will affect the rates of categorisation as suicide between genders so that the rate for men is artificially inflated by coroners looking for an 'easy-to-categorise' cause, while the rate for women was artificially being reduced by coroners and police officials stereotyping what a suicide victim does or does not look like. "If you do not look like a suicide victim, the probability [of being categorised as one] goes down, right", he said. I asked him if he meant young women by that statement; that their causes of death were being misattributed. He responded, "well, all women. Unless there is a suicide note". This would point to the rising figures, though already comparatively high among Japanese women, being even worse than shown, with even the officials within the Japanese government responding to the ongoing crisis vastly and critically underestimating the severity of the problem.

The second major fallacy of official suicide rate figures is that they indicate only the rates of fatality and not necessarily the rates of attempts or ideation. Therefore, much like in other countries, though "suicide attempts are more frequently undertaken by women, men are more often the performers of effective (lethal, fatal) suicides" (Tsirigotis, Gruszczynski, & Tsirigotis, 2011, p.66; cf. WHO, 1999; WHO, 2010; Pietro and Tavares, 2005, pp.146-154). This creates what has been called the "gender paradox", a paradoxical relationship by which women attempt more, while dying less worldwide. This is, of course, subject to literal survivorship bias, with men who on average take fewer attempts to die unable to make more attempts after their deaths (Wang et al., 2020, p.684; WHO, 1999; Pietro and Tavares, 2005, pp.147-149; Runeson et al., 2010; Canetto and Sakinofsky, 1998, pp.3-23; Stefanello et al., 2008, pp.139-143).

But what does this have to do with the argument this chapter makes on the evolving and culturally influenced means of suicide in modern Japan? Not just suicide rate figures, but suicide attempt rate figures too have been held in contention by informants in both datasets. Though Duignan's study revealed that "10-20% of patients transferred to the ER are suicide attempters in Japan" (Saving 10,000, Winning a War on Suicide in Japan, 2012), vloggers speaking about their post-attempt inpatient experiences give accounts which add

up to an argument that attempts too are significantly higher than official figures might suggest. Personal vlog accounts of women admitted to emergency wards suggest that the high cost of mental health care creates barriers to proper diagnosis. Many cannot afford the missed money of taking unpaid time off work, the cost of being institutionalised in a psychiatric ward, or the cost of speaking to a mental health professional in a country wherein healthcare for mental health issues can be both taboo and prohibitively expensive, so they will give in to pressure to say they were 'just doing it for the attention' to medical professionals in order to be discharged, which then could reinforce this idea in the professionals' minds.

Inspiration

Multiple women in their vlogs also described incidents of violence from parents and intimate partners and directly attributed their choice of means to this violence. Examples included a woman in the V3 group who had an alcoholic mother. She regularly contemplated slashing her wrists and throat with the smashed glass she saw in the house every day. Throughout much of the childhood that she could remember, her mother would come into her room intoxicated and be violent towards her. Therefore, her ideas of violence when she was considering self-harm were formulated around ideas memetic of this same violence or alcoholism's metonymic symbolism in the bottle. She said that when she cut herself, she did so with broken glass from a bottle of alcohol she had finished herself rather than a blade, considering it 'fitting' and 'poetic' as she did so while thinking of a female romantic interest. She had doubts that her mother would react well to her homoromantic thoughts and decided to replace what she assumed her mother's spurning words against her would be with a self-inflicted violence that made her think of her mother.

Another vlogger in the V3 group described a physical altercation with an ex-partner after a disagreement. She was presented with a suicide manual bought for her by this partner and told that if she wanted to die, to just "go die" (the wording used was "死ね" – *shine* meaning 'to die' in imperative form). She took that instruction and used the manual to learn how to tie a noose, from which she attempted to die by hanging.

In the latter video, the vlogger held the manual up to the camera. It appeared to be a copy of the '*Kanzen Jisatsu Manyuaru'* (The Complete Suicide Manual) by Wataru Tsurumi (cf. Tsurumi, 1993). The EU delegates in the EU/Japan joint commission on suicide prevention have called on the Japanese government to ban these manuals, but as of the time of this writing, they are still legal, and being printed and sold (Duignan, 2013). As of August 2022 (my time of writing this), it costs as little as 600 yen to order a copy of a suicide manual on amazon.jp, but I found it available from many other vendors with a quick google search, including its re-release in a 'collector's edition' format for a recommended retail price of 2562 yen. These manuals are best-sellers in Japan. The justification Tsurumi gives for profiting from the dissemination of information on how one can end one's life effectively (as per an interview he posted on his official blog) is that he advocates that people should have a way to escape from life if it consists only of "living hard" and "living strongly". Instead, he believes that the existence of his manual can make living a painful life easier, because the backup option is there to die if the need arises (Tsurumi, 2019). Ozawa de-Silva (2021, pp.58-59) reflects also that this manual is matter-of-fact and, in subverting the "traditional Japanese cultural values of trying hard, doing one's best, and making the most effort (*ganbaru*) to survive life", he makes a compelling point that people can "cope with their lives with less pressure" knowing there is a "way out".

Case study – In poverty, a medical bill can be a suicide note

As a telling case study for analysis, a vlogger in the V1 group told the story of her admission and psychiatric assessment process which she felt later went some way to inspiring the subsequent suicide deaths of both of her parents:

"I felt like a burden. My mother, my mother, well, my father was being someone else's father, my mother was in abject poverty [(here she used the controversial and sensitive word '*binbou'* which can be interpreted as bitter or derogatory towards experiences of the impoverished)] and we were often sleeping on floors. I already knew that her life would be sad but easier if I were not alive, right. She would become able to eat. She got cancer. I did not know what to do. For the assessment and tests alone, it cost over 39,000 yen. That was

more than she had. She had to borrow money from her friend who worked at the convenience store. She herself was struggling too, I'm sure. My mother will die, I thought. So that night I went up to the lake after my part time job. I looked at the cliff above. I thought, 'what if I throw myself into the water [from there]? Will it carry me away? Will it carry my mother's problems away? She can [better] afford treatment'".

To take a Durkheimian perspective here, her story describes a manifest multimorbidity between three 'maladies of society': inaccessibility of healthcare for people with life-threatening health conditions (especially if untreated); the struggles of poverty; and the breakdown of family values, here related to paternal care obligations. Her personal ideation at the beach that night was a snapshot of a symptom of this multimorbidity going untreated in a society failing to understand and support its most vulnerable.

She continued to describe how that ideation turned into an attempt to take her own life:

"I returned to see my mother with tears that would not stop. She looked at me. I looked back and saw only the most painful things. About three days later I took lots of medicine and leapt from a window. Now that I think about it, I wasn't going to die. It was[…] I think from the third floor".

The lack of expected lethality of her attempt is consistent with what would be expected with the following factors considered: her gender (Vijayakumar, 2015, pp.234-235); her attempt having fewer (in this case, probably zero) prior attempts to increase in violence and lethality from (Wang et al., 2020); and her age (Jena and Sidhartha, 2004, pp.310-318). She recounted that she was a first-year high school student at the time of this attempt, meaning she was only 15 or 16 years of age at the time.

Her level of integration within her school setting, in addition to her close relationship with her mother, with the associated sense of obligation she recalled feeling towards the latter especially, are further consistent with a classification of attempted 'altruistic suicide' under the Durkheimian system of classifying suicides. This classification can be made when suicide

attempters are “willing to sacrifice their own life in order to fulfil some obligation for the group” (Singh, 2020).

There is however a cultural nuance that must be taken into account here when transplanting a European classification framework into a Japanese setting. Western ideas of ‘obligation’ would be less appropriate to use here when a more Japan-specific cultural idea of *‘jikosekinin’* is commonplace in the way Japanese people talk about suicide. This specific vlogger later termed her initial attempt to be a case of her own ‘*jikosekinin*’ in her mind. The idea of ‘*jikosekinin*’ was defined by one interviewee from an Okinawan advocacy group for survivors rescued from the suicide hotspot at Ie Shima cliffs as ‘taking responsibility for a situation by yourself, in a self-sacrificing manner’ after he used the term ‘*jikosekinin jisatsu*’ – ‘a type of suicide in which *jikosekinin* is present as motive’. ‘*Jikosekinin jisatsu*’ was a recurring term in many of the interviews with different contexts. Rather than using Eurocentric classifications, it might therefore be more helpful to establish a framework for understanding suicide motivations from the non-equitable framework surrounding ideas of ‘*sekinin wo torukoto’*, or ‘taking responsibility’ more commonly found in Japanese discourses around suicide.

“I was sleepy from the medicine but I came to the hospital and they asked me for my name and contact information. I knew my mother had no money so I lied and gave a fake name; fake information. I tried to leave but was too weak. Then my mother came and used my real name and we received a bill. I think that was about 30,000 yen and they said they would send the bill for the ambulance separately”. This shows a tension within the healthcare system between its capitalist model and its intended purpose. The suicide survivor felt inclined out of obligation to her mother to rebel against the ‘correct’ way of accessing healthcare, as the costs associated with the healthcare would exacerbate one of the greatest causes of her mother’s mental distress. Due to increasing financial stresses on patients or their financial supporters, rather than a healthcare system set up to alleviate and support patients’ mental health, accessing the hospitals can cause further upset to those in financial distress. A literally fatal flaw that is made evident in the system is that in failing to consider the socio-economic causes of distress for impoverished and less financially stable patients, it can add to them by design. This is backed by Wiltshire et al.’s (2020) data on

American patients in a similarly privatised healthcare system: “individuals who had problems paying medical bills had more count days of mental health symptoms [...] than those who did not have problems paying medical bills” (p.278). This is a conclusion of too many scholars to ignore out of medical-political convenience. Therefore, when advocates have told me (6 out of N=23 organic responses, absent of leading questions) that they are actively campaigning for socialised or government-paid healthcare for ER visits and GP consultations regarding or as a result of suicidal ideation or a survived attempt, they have a point that easing the financial burden on patients could be effective in bettering mental health outcomes and reducing the number of future suicide attempts. A counterargument to this has been outlined by Japan’s delegate to the EU/Japan joint commission on suicide strategy, Reverend Yukio Saito in 2013. Approximately 10-20% of ER visits are the result of suicide attempts, and 5.4% of GP consultations are people seeking diagnoses for depression, with 71.4% of those seeking diagnoses sharing suicidal ideation on most days as a symptom when asked as part of the diagnosis process using the PHQ-9 questionnaire model as standard. He said that at this level, it would be prohibitively expensive for the government to step in and cover the healthcare costs for suicidal people. Surely though, this lack of government aid passes the costs from the state to patients and their families at their times of distress, causing situations like the one this vlogger experienced to become even more distressing.

Japan’s relationship with family values is deeply rooted in the cultural history of *bushido,* a moral code dating back to the Edo period (1603-1868) born from neo-Confucianism, and following Confucian texts with cited influences from Shinto and Zen Buddhism (Nitobe, 2010). Acting upon a sense of duty to one’s family or clan is termed ‘*giri*’ in Japanese traditional values. The internal battle between feelings of ‘*giri’* (duty to family and clan) and ‘*ninjou’* (humanity; what feels ‘natural’ to a person, including behaviours in the vein of self-preservation) at points of moral crisis in one’s life is a well-trodden cliché in Japanese media from *jidai geki* (period films from the dawn of Japanese cinema) through to modern drama stories (Takahide, 2011, pp.6-12). The vlogger reflected on this same cliché and laughed that perhaps she herself could be a character in a book; that she could be that perfect portrayal of the same cliché; a quintessential study of a moment of fantasticalised *nihonjinron* made flesh in self-injury. She looked deeply into the camera and asked who she was. Was that

cultural identity all that was left of her past the numbness? Was therefore the '*giri'* as victor in her internal moral battle against her sense of *'ninjou'* sufficient to drive her body to overcome its instincts to protect itself from harm. If so, the crisis of self in her eyes in the pause she left in the video after this reflection with an unnaturally long stare, clearly overcoming any drive to blink becomes something worth analysing as a message she might have wanted to communicate to the world. In the editing process she actively chose to include that pause for consideration with a call to action in the intensity of her stare. Again, the self-driven, self-decided sense of self against what it is that society might have one become in thought and in action and in word that so many other vloggers and their advocates made so recurring a theme is recapitulated not just in words and reflections but in the audience being given the time with only that to reflect on themselves. She released this video in Japanese with no alternative language support so we know the country demographic of the intended audience. We know that they themselves would be overwhelmingly Japanese; likely brought up on the same kind of media. They themselves are the demographic which *is* the subject of *nihonjinron*. This is a call for reflection; for understanding in reflection; for, if not a community, a communal feeling of what influences 'feelings of selfhood'. It calls to reflect on in what circumstances in their own lives their own senses of *'giri'* might overpower the self-preservative nature of their own sense of '*ninjou*'. It says that she is not that different for thinking in these ways. She is asking them to realise the potential for self-destruction that *'giri'* holds. She ended on a term she invented for the performance of self-destruction due to '*giri*', *'girigiri*', using the homonym of *giri* (義理 – duty to family or clan), with *giri* (切り – to cut).

She had said "goodnight" to her mother, as was her childhood routine. Three days later her mother's body was discovered floating in the lake she had initially considered as a potential suicide site for herself. One of the greatest missing pieces in the stories told by suicide case studies is the information held by the deceased. Whether her mother was taking her place as her '*giri'* for her daughter, or whether it was a death of despair from the inescapability of the financial situation which would leave her to die of cancer with no hope of treatment is something we can only suppose. Perhaps this was her '*sekinin wo torukoto'* - taking responsibility and minimising the suffering of her children. Perhaps she chose the trauma of

lasting absence only rather than that same absence following seeing their mother fade away while starving as she became less and less able to work, causing the family unit's most basic human needs also to become less and less easy to be met. It feels wrong to classify the deprivation of a loving mother to her children as an 'altruistic suicide' as per Durkheim's system. What is 'altruistic' about a loving mother becoming a casualty of a cutthroat capitalist model of healthcare which holds health and life to ransom for the tens of thousands to millions of yen so few people have? Clearly out of sensitivity, a more ethnopsychiatric model which establishes new ontological models of defining suicides would be more appropriate[17].

This may be a case of '*jikosekinin*' suicide but it is also sacrificial. "My mother did not want to die *at all"*. Suicide without a history of any signs of ideation that this vlogger could see; suicide without a 'death drive' as Freud would have it, these are surely signs that there is an external pressure from something deeply harmful. The cancer, yes, would be an easy scapegoat for the cause. But it is more that the cancer drove her mother into a broken and financially exploitative healthcare system that puts overheads over the mental wellbeing of patients that exacerbated her mother's financial stresses. The medical system as she found it is deeply broken and harmful to anybody living without excessive wealth. There are issues here with wealth distribution between generations and in general Japanese society, but also an elephant in the room which is that those from lesser financial means are avoiding utilising the Japanese medical system, thus reducing help-seeking behaviour. For those with stress or suicidal ideation stemming from financial woes who might genuinely benefit from mental health support, there is a very real fear among themselves and their advocates that their downward financial spiral will be made even worse by medical bills if they seek help. The very people who should be benefitting from mental health care including talking therapies proven to be effective are instead avoiding it out of fear (Clarke et al., 2015, pp.60-62).

Her story continued in a downward trajectory. Her father died by suicide in his bedroom three months after her mother. She assumed that he felt guilty. She experienced symptoms

[17] Widger (2014, pp.112-114) has also made the argument for this same approach to remodelling understandings of suicide in his ethnographic exploration of the rising Sri-Lankan suicide rate.

of insomnia and the inability to eat. She said that she feels that her parents' lives were thrown away (she used the word '*suterareta*', as in 'to have been disposed of like litter' to say this). She also became obsessed with checking herself for lumps which might indicate cancer in herself, reasoning that she might be at higher risk of cancer due to genetics passed down from her mother. She said "if a suicide survivor is *binbou* [(impoverished - derogatory)], a suicide note is not needed. It is the doctor's bill [that is the suicide note]".

Case study - means building in violence

A V2 vlogger with trouble breathing and significant visible injuries which appeared to be infected burns and cuts in her wrists mapped her history of suicide attempts and her reasoning as to why she keeps attempting suicide and self-harming.

Vlogger - "I have tried to kill myself four times so far. The first time was when I was a junior in high school. I took about 70 cold and flu tablets. On the second attempt, I took a bottle of Seirogan (stomach medicine), all of it. As I reflect on it now, you would not be able to actually overdose and die from that even if you were to take 300 or 400 [pills]. But I did not know that then. The third time it was hanging but ended up unsuccessful - just an attempt. The same was true the fourth time when I attempted using H_2S[18]. From my experience, what others say doesn't count for anything. Friends, they never help you, right? They do not give us money. And I can never receive benefits, not even 1000 yen. Eventually, they say we have to survive by ourselves[...] What I worried about is if my friends were to wonder, 'why could I not realise the changes to her behaviour? If only I had realised', like blaming themselves way too much for being insensitive to me. It is really painful to imagine them thinking like that[...] Um, speaking as a suicidal person, we do not at all want them to. That would make us even more sad while in heaven".

Here we have the highlights of her progression to more violent means, with the visible cutting and burn damage not receiving a mention in her description of her self-destruction.

[18] H2S is Hydrogen Sulfide. It causes death by rapid-onset organ damage with common symptoms of having inhaled it including delirium, seizures, and coma.

She also clearly hints that the progression to violent means could be interrupted with financial support and provides a clear example of how the violence and intensity of means can increase when (eg. medical/psychiatric/financial) interventions are not put in place.

"But it is because they do not trust you in the first place. They do not expect you to do anything. Then they feel responsible [when you kill yourself], because they regard 'being alive' as being 'good' or 'just'. However, whether you live or not does not really matter. Both are the same. Simply being alive is not as virtuous a pursuit as people may think. I'm actually pleased [when I hear of a successful suicide attempt]. I feel like, 'they escaped the troubles of life by themself. Good for them'. That is just my opinion though. I believe whether you live or die is just 'whatever'. Both have merits. Both have pros and cons. Life is not that beautiful".

In this part of her testimony, nothing matters but the "escape from troubles". It appears the aim is not for death itself, but again, for escape. I would like to highlight here that the use of H_2S is very unusual on the world stage but has a significant history in internet-age Japan. Morii et al. (2010) reported that "an introduction of new methods of making the gas, transmitted through message boards on the internet" caused an "outbreak" of deaths and injuries in Japan with a tally consisting of both people using it to attempt to end their lives and people who would discover bodies and inhale the gas in the process of discovery and attempted recovery of the attempter. "The method entailed mixing bath additives" used in Japanese *onsen* and a toilet detergent one might buy from a non-specialist supermarket. The bath additives are more readily available to purchase in Japan because they are used to enjoy bathing in '*onsen*-like' water from the comfort of one's home. "The main component of the bath additive is lime sulfur" which reacts with the toilet detergent as an oxidant to produce H_2S gas. "These two materials are easily available in Japan, and also obtainable through the internet" (ibid).

Both the exact methodology and web links to purchase the chemicals have been shared on forum sites, especially the '2channeru' forum (ibid[19]). This toxicological means was

[19] Although I found some of the instructional posts myself on 2channeru by using the 'wayback machine' online tool to verify this, I am opting not to cite this as a source directly due to an ethical

effectively unheard of before it started appearing in internet conversations but it is a result of viewing these conversations online that this vlogger became hospitalised with damage from deliberately gassing herself. She said directly that the internet inspired her means.

Case study – sacrifice

Mei (pseudonym), an advocate working with mothers described the suicide that made her quit her work for several months. It had left her with what I interpreted as trauma but she never named it as such. The explanation came completely unprompted and I worried that she had been suppressing the emotions she felt at the time from when this happened with little to no outlet, to the detriment of her mental health. As a disclaimer, for ethical reasons I asked her whether she had received any support for processing her emotions. She answered that her boss had had a debrief session with her at the end of her shift but she was still left with some feelings she was unable to explain. I encouraged her to seek further mental health support, and reminded her both before and during this disclosure that she did not have to discuss anything that would be harmful to her mental health.

Mei had encountered a service user - a young woman in her mid-twenties who had been ostracised from her family after she became pregnant from sexual intercourse with a man who would go on to take no responsibility for his child. She birthed their child and turned to hostess work to make rent, leaving her child with friends to go out in the evening to the seedier parts of Shinjuku and Roppongi to work. The service user realised that her mental health was suffering as a result of this work, and her friends' charity for free babysitting was wearing thin, so she decided to save on rent by living out of manga cafés in Tokyo. She felt a great amount of guilt for not being able to provide a safe environment for her son. Being a single mother, it was difficult to do *shuukatsu* (job hunting processes) the same as others in her age/gender cohort might be able to, due to issues finding childcare. This meant that she was consistently struggling to make ends meet, and routinely foregoing her and her sons' basic needs. It was also difficult for her to date with financial aspiration, as any potential

decision not to provide links to instructional content on how to harm oneself as I cannot guarantee that no reader of this work is going to access this dangerous content in an unsafe way.

partner with the financial means to give her and her child a ‘good life’ and an escape from their situation was also able to choose instead to partner with somebody who would not be so financially dependent.

This service user had realised that there was no realistic reason for anybody to give her an escape to her situation. She was desperate, but made it clear to Mei that she had no desire to die on the several occasions that concern had been expressed. The service user realised that even if she could not escape her social situation, there was a way for her son to. She took out a life insurance policy on herself with her son as the payee upon reaching adulthood as what was effectively a blood-soaked ‘trust fund’. She waited for the date at which the policy would pay out for a death by suicide and then ended her life the next day. She went from no known suicide attempts or disclosures of suicidal ideation to dying by jumping in front of a train by what Mei assumed was a sheer determination that she wanted her son to have the things in life she could not provide. She left instructions which were also forwarded to the advocacy group that her son should be handed over to state care so that he would not have to be affected by homelessness or lack of food any longer.

Hence Mei said that when she saw the aesthetics of suicide support on TikTok, she spat on the floor and the spit had the taste of blood. Mei said that the suicide support on social media platforms telling people that even if it was “painful to continue” they should try to just ‘*ganbare*’ (try their best) misunderstood that many people would very much prefer to live but they loved people who would benefit from their deaths more than they loved being alive. Mei said that what was needed more than simple sympathies was social support such as child maintenance and a universal basic income so that these kinds of choices need not be made. She, like most of my informants, believed that the social context these suicide cases exist in is not improving.

She did not know what care arrangements were finally made for the service user’s son. He was under five years of age at the time of his mother’s passing. In this case study we see illustrated that even though means will tend to become more violent with each attempt, the violence of the first known attempt for this woman was accelerated by an intense determination rooted in her maternal affections.

I would like to end this chapter by relating it to a discussion from a vlog discussing comments made on a previous video which had engagement in the comment section from women commenting their experiences and asking if anybody had similar experiences. In this, many mothers sought to spread messages of "strength". The vlogger concurred with a commenter who wrote "thinking 'I want to die' is evidence of a strong life". She contextualised the kind of strength as the strength of a maternal bond for her but accepted that 'strength' might mean different things to different people. To her it meant the 'strength to take responsibility' for one's dependants but also considered the question of whether it would be better to sacrifice oneself out of sense of '*jikosekinin'* (self-responsibility), or whether that is unfair to other younger people because in deciding to end one's life one is also shifting the tax burden of social support for the elderly onto them to pay the tax the deceased would have paid if they had survived. One woman commented that she had decided not to attempt to take her own life, ending with: "The words, 'Because you are a wonderful person with a sense of responsibility that makes you want to die,' saved my heart. Thank you".

In Search of a Life Worth Living –

"A hundred times I was upon the point of killing myself; but still I loved life. This ridiculous foible is perhaps one of our most fatal characteristics; for is there anything more absurd than to wish to carry continually a burden which one can always throw down? To detest existence and yet to cling to one's existence? In brief, to caress the serpent which devours us, till he has eaten our very heart"?

- Voltaire (1759, p.53) – Candide [Translation by Project Gutenberg – (2006)]

Using this study's findings, how can we start to find an answer to the most pressing question for research impact beyond the academic search for 'what suicide means to the informants and survivors in this study's context': how do we increase survivorship and decrease the rates of fatal and survived suicide attempts among the struggling? We must acknowledge

the struggles inherent to existing in the social context for those considering suicide. We must take the tears and the harm resultant of these struggles as a call to arms in the fight against suicide: a fight for a life worth living.

Jocelyn Chua's work on the attainability of visions of 'the good life' and its effect upon suicide rates can offer an insight already as to a way of considering ideation itself as a quality-of-life issue before we begin to look at reducing fatalities and attempts. Her ethnographic work in Kerala, South India, an economic hotspot of industry growth, jobs, and the many travellers drawn to it dreaming of a better life gives a poignant reminder that the death of a person resigned to suicide is also a death of the idea of a brighter world that they could live to see. I could not help but find parallels between the despair she witnessed as what Kleinman (1990) might term 'social suffering' in Kerala and the bitterness in the testimonies I heard in my own research (Chua, 2014).'

Corresponding with Ryuichi (pseudonym), a close friend and advocate in Tokyo, the following statements from his organisation and an interview with him struck me as remarkably similar to Chua's hypotheses about mental health outcomes in adverse social circumstances:

"Increasingly, the term 'mental health' appears on news and social media. In fact, in Japan, we feel that the reason for this is that there are more people with low ability to achieve self-actualisation than in other developed countries, and more people are becoming mentally ill as a result. The ability to attain what you want from life is only worsening due to the influence of the new coronavirus variants. The number of mental health patients is increasing year-on-year, and the effect of corona is clear. The number of suicides remains high. […] For some, living with poor mental health can be a painful experience, and what makes it worse is to see today's world - a world in which the life you want to see [for yourself] has turned out to be a nothing but a fantasy".

– Excerpt from the official statement regarding the evolving mental health situation in Japan by the advocacy group 'No Youth No Japan' (2022). Received via personal correspondence.

Ryuichi - “Our message that is not being heard is that mental health care should not be a show of weakness. Taking care of your heart [(*kokoro* – heart in an emotional rather than medical sense]] is proof that you cherish yourself and your life”.

One of the vloggers in the V3 group had attempted to be referred for talking therapies. She explained her interaction with a general practitioner who prescribed her anti-depressants and declined her request to see or talk to anybody in a psychiatric role, even though she had diligently saved up the money to do so. She was a university student at the time, and so also asked at the university’s health centre if they could recommend somewhere she could go to without a referral. They declined and told her to take her pills as prescribed. She said, “they say the way to live is just take the medicine. I want to live in a way that suits me”, and talked about the kind of life she would like to have. It was humble. Her one demand that she hit on over and over again was that the gendered division of who performs the emotional labour not just in intimate relationships, but her life in general should change. She joked that perhaps she would have to save up some more money in order to visit a host club to talk to someone about her emotions. She complained that in her relationships with men there was the expectation that no matter how poor her mental health was, she should perform unpaid emotional labour for them but not ask for it in return. This search for help becoming fruitless, this desire to be followed up with that is being missed, and the pressure to perform a role of therapist to men when the desire is to be a patient is such a recurrent theme in the data that it needs to be addressed. I would recommend a follow-up study on potential palliative care interventions follow up on stories such as hers and look at meeting depressed and/or suicidally ideating people with resources where they seek them out. Patient-focussed and patient-informed approaches have already been shown to be highly effective when trialled within the Japanese medical system (Jomori et al., 2020, pp.199-203). The data from this study too shows that people who are ideating can give great insights as to how to speak to them in their words and respond to them effectively, insights which could guide suicide prevention efforts both within the medical system and within Japanese society more broadly. The medical system is pricing people who could benefit from it out of it, with a great deal of mistrust held towards it according to the vloggers. This shows that a patient-informed, affordable model could be more effective at integrating and supporting people in crisis and in recovery from depression and ideation.

Chase et al. (2021, pp.267-269) hypothesised based on fieldwork with women providing emotional labour in Nepal that the normalisation of "engaging women in demanding, skilled work on a volunteer basis not only reinforces the systemic undervaluation of women's labour, but exploits [them]". Their literature review further revealed that "a growing body of global health research documents the preponderance of women in low- and unpaid roles and the gendered social, financial, and mental health consequences of healthcare volunteerism". A good life in which a woman among others would be listened to was one in which rather than having her mental health be collateral damage in emotional labour expected of her to provide due to her gender, there was a more equitable system in which she could expect it in return when she was feeling mentally unwell. It is one in which she could subvert what she believed the gendered expectations to be in modern Japan and not be expected to perform emotional labour when it would have negative consequences for her mental health. There has been an explosion in usage of informal chat-based counselling services such as *Anata no Ibasho*[20], according to their volunteers. Still, they estimate that for every 25 people who attempt to access their services now that they have a queue system programmed into their website, only one can be responded to with a standard 40-minute free counselling session. This shows that non-reciprocal services available for free, or affordably, at point of need from trained professionals are not just being used and sought out, but are highly expandable and would be likely to be used if the resources could be allocated to create them.

Recalculating life's value

Many women felt that if their time performing emotional labour or working unpaid overtime is assumed to be free, reconsidering the worth of the time they have left to live as worthless is not too far a stretch. When they die by *karōshi* and their employers are only fined token sums if anything at all, what does that say for the worth the legal system places on their lives (McCurry, 2017a)? When the average wages in 2019 (the most recent government figure) paid to women for an entire year's full-time labour were just 1.65

[20] English translation: 'Your Place to Be'. Available in Japanese only at: https://talkme.jp/chat (Accessed 1 October 2022)

million yen for high school graduates, 1.84 million yen for higher professional school and junior college graduates, 2.07 million yen for university graduates, and 2.38 million yen for those with masters degrees, is this level of pre-tax compensation while the pensions bill for Japan's aging population heavily erodes even that in taxation really sufficient to allow young women to live a good life (*Kōsei-rōdō-shō*[21], 2020)? A realistic expectation that is not being met for women in the study is to be able to gather the savings to financially enable them to pursue their dreams or even just to pay for the hobbies that could bring them joy in life. If the good life to someone who loves dancing or singing or art looks like a booking at a studio or karaoke room, are they financially able to have even that once taxes and living expenses are accounted for?

Overwhelming pessimism about the future for themselves is fuelling a desire to escape from their situations. "*Nigetai"* – "I want to escape" was the vloggers' most common way of expressing suicidal intent due to displeasure at their current life situations. But when fiscal means, lack of social opportunity, or personal physical or mental health states limit their ability to escape in the more preferable ways they listed: to go abroad; to find a way to avoid factors that the vloggers and advocates in this study have found so ubiquitous; to get a promotion to help claw their way out of debt or afford to look after their dependents, the escape methods have evolved in ways which at-times have proved highly self-destructive. There are clear coping methods being sought out where the medical system fails to provide sufficient support in accessible ways which hints strongly that help-seeking behaviours are not at all uncommon. People are using the internet to access online resources and contact charities and advocacy groups. They interact with content made by creators with similar diagnoses (or self-diagnoses) to themselves and form informal support structures one might argue meet Victor Turner's (1995, p.132) definition of 'communitas'. Some retreat from the '*sanjigen'* ('real world') to the internet either as content creators or consumers as temporary 'escape'. While some advocates had reservations about these informal interactions on the internet due to concerns that people would create 'echo chambers' of negative or destructive thoughts, the ideas and messages in these internet spaces were mixed in intent. Where instructional posts such as ones detailing effective methods of self-

[21] Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare

harm or suicide were artificially accelerating the violence of means taken by some consumers of this content, messages of support such as those found in suicide-related content on Youtube and Twitters' comment sections were being met positively in the replies. The relationship between suicide and the internet is complex and evolving, with both positive and negative influences on the suicide-related content that could affect survival and reattempt rates and scales of violence in self-inflicted injury. Mental health trajectories of people at point of crisis or ideation were affected by interventions (or despair and feelings of worthlessness at lack of interventions[22]) both provided by friends and advocates, and their internet usage, in addition to ideas that might influence their own personal understandings about the meaning of suicide from media and their conversations.

For individuals with caring responsibilities to direct dependents such as children or enfeebled relatives in addition to their indirect financial responsibilities to Japan's aging population through higher taxation to support their pensions and gerontological care needs, some individuals saw suicide as a kind thing to do. If they kill themselves, those close to them will be picked up by the state to be looked after in a way that they themselves could not, and they would not become old and become financial burdens on the state. Oppositely though, two vloggers (both in the V2 group) said that they were staying alive because of a sense of duty and purpose: if they ended their lives and did not fulfil their 'social obligations' to work and pay taxes, the tax burden would be passed on to others in their age cohort and the situation might become even worse for them. These kinds of intense feelings of 'self-responsibility' have been key to contextualising understandings of individual suicidal intent within a framework specific to Japanese society. In a follow-up study, it would be useful to analyse how demographics related to direct dependents can influence feelings of self-responsibility, and how that in turn might be affecting suicidal intent. Is survival greater or lesser when more dependents are in the picture, and is the perceived risk higher when the suicidal person cannot adequately meet their dependents' care needs without self-sacrifice?

[22] A V1 group vlogger said sarcastically about her experiences of the mental health care system in Japan: "what? Am I not worth an intervention? Are our lives not worth the salary of a doctor to give us an intervention?".

On Abuse

When reflecting upon my data and experiences of seeing and hearing first-hand accounts of women's experiences in Japanese society one thing strikes me above all else. Just as Osaki et al. (2021, pp.39-44) found comparing the social crises resultant of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, suicide rates increased in both cases substantially for women, largely in the authors' views because they were made more susceptible to abuse.

Where they had no choice but to rely on management to keep more unstable employment, they were often overworked or made victims of '*pawa-hara'* or '*sekuhara'*. When their ability to meet basic human needs such as for food and shelter was threatened, they were often pressured into sex work or staying with abusive partners in order to ensure their and their dependents' survival. In the context of financial abuse, their access to support was often withdrawn as they could not afford to access the medical system or even have the free time and disposable income to meet a friend for coffee and an opportunity to talk about their situations, or to pursue an education such as might help them leave their current situations.

Much of the abuse mentioned in testimonies occurred in the workplace, but much also occurred in the streets, in homes, in the medical system, and in education. While sometimes direct blame was placed upon the context of abuse for self-destructive behaviours such as means of self-harm mirroring threats of violence from others, some self-destructive behaviours came as coping mechanisms for other comorbidities to suicidal ideation such as PTSD and depression.

Final thoughts

I will end this discussion with a thought from an interviewee who helped me in my own personal advocacy, and to whom I am deeply grateful:
"Parents expect [their daughter] to succeed and then the success, the idea, the image of success is pushed on her, right. It is just not attainable anymore. This idea of like 'this is

what a good life looks like for you - that we want you to have'. That is like a high power position like a decent job with decent salary. And that is when expectations cross with the limiting factors like everything women are *expected* to be - a receptionist or whatever. Every time fucked up leaving them, like pushing them, towards this 'this is what the good life looks like' and then that is much less attainable than for the men. Today's society is what's wrong".

Another advocate I admire summarised the service users of their suicide support messaging service. "They feel like failures, right. And then they get depressed because they feel sort of like failures. They're not".

A commenter on a video responded to a vlogger in the V3 group: "Thinking only about the uncertain future, I became more anxious and [began] crying alone, and I felt like everyone, including myself, became an enemy".

The context in which these women are living and considering dying in is one in which social support is lacking and their emotional and survival needs are often unmet. Their freedom to choose a family structure they feel happy in is limited by economic pressures and a lack of equal marriage rights and acceptance of same-sex partnerships. What is expected of women in modern Japan to aspire to is often out of reach. With aspirations and expectations built up for them and yet ending unmet, not only is the life they would choose for themselves given complete freedom nigh-impossible to attain, but the life that looks like success and was more attainable in Japan's bubble economy is too. The standard of expectations they are raised on and punished for not attaining is far too high. As one informant from a suicide prevention agency said: "They climb the cliffs because they are high. You can see everything from on top of a cliff. They leap from a cliff because it is the highest place they see. They want to fly but they cannot fly. So they fall. First they fall into a depression. Then they fall into madness. Then they fall into Hell. That's suicide. That's what it is".

Conclusion

Though this study has been limited by its one-year timeframe and the obvious pandemic-related travel restrictions, it has yielded over 100 hours of testimonies describing in great detail, oftentimes with heartfelt personal anecdotes, the issues and ideas in need of more in-depth research, recognition, and action to combat. As a pilot study, it justifies a further PhD-level study which can track more longitudinally to what extent certain societal factors which may have been exacerbated by the global pandemic may be affecting suicide rates. This includes unstable/underemployment, social isolation, vulnerability to domestic abuse due to less opportunity to socialise/go to work, and lack of affordable/available childcare among a multitude of other factors.

The data from this study shows that concepts around, and meanings found in, selfhood, self-determinism, and suicide are deeply interlinked with experiences of Japanese society. Gender relationships and the ways in which women search for meaningful ways to exist in a country with attributes at-times hindering their ability to meet their own physical and mental health needs are changing. Underlying issues such as workplace bullying, with '*pawahara'* and '*sekuhara*' (abuse of power by higher-ups, and sexual harassment) appear to be ongoing concerns. However, the suicide discourse Kitanaka (2012, p.107) has already highlighted a decade ago as being dangerous in its ability to used to deflect blame from businesses and actionable social factors still seems to persist. As a response to her initial summary of discourses around depression, suicidal ideation and mental health, this more contemporary study supports her findings and further finds that not much has changed. Her findings within the medical community are similar to broader societal views that depression, suicidal ideation and other maladies are 'problems of the self' and therefore the onus to resolve self-destructive feelings falls upon those who are already struggling to stay alive. Then, being subject to these views is directly translating to feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and less resilience with help-seeking behaviour.

Ozawa De-Silva's (2021) observations of many trajectories to suicide being lonely are only reaffirmed by this study. Many survivors considering reattempting suicide reported feelings of isolation and loneliness. However, concern for family is still largely a protective factor, as the informants and survivors in this study have remarked in various ways. The only exception to this seems to be in the case of children of single mothers, for whom that

concern for their wellbeing is a risk factor: if they die, their children will be picked up by social services and have their needs provided for where their mother would struggle to while she lives.

Advocates are having to focus their energies and resources on lobbying for widespread systemic changes that are needed to reduce psychiatric caseloads and social suffering. This means that they are struggling to respond effectively to individuals' needs and specific situations. Every suicide prevention phoneline support service and online chat service involved in this study is currently completely overwhelmed to the extent that they cannot respond to more than a fraction of those seeking their services. This research has found significantly more of these services are available now compared to when Duignan (2013) decried the lack of them and their overburdened nature to the national government some years ago. However, the number of people seeking these services has also increased substantially to the extent that Japanese people in crisis are regularly contacting specialist foreign language crisis services such as Tokyo English LifeLine hoping they might actually get through to somebody.

Overall, the suicide rate situation is evolving and provision of services is not keeping up with demand from those most at risk. Moreover, rising suicide rates among only the demographic of young women while those of other demographics are falling is indicative of further issues for a subsection of society in distress. We cannot overlook the suffering survivors and those simply ideating suicide are experiencing just because they are not reflected in suicide rate data that only counts those who have died by a fatal suicide attempt. It is the more compassionate practice to target suicide prevention at the point of ideation by increasing provision of accessible care, or even better, to listen to the testimonies of those who are struggling and increasing social welfare and loneliness prevention measures so that people do not begin considering suicide in the first place. We can put in means-restrictive measures such as barriers on cliffs all we like, but unless the underlying issues are further researched and acted on proactively, the social suffering will still persist. Further research that might guide decision makers and legislators based on the views of those it could help is required in this evolving fight against a complex social malady.

Appendix

Questions for interviewees

The question list was as follows (Translations included):

英語 (English)

1. Can you tell me a little about you, your personal background, and your role in [the organisation]?

2. What does [the organisation] do, and why do you think it is particularly important?

3. What first got you interested in doing what you do now?

4. What have your experiences been like since joining [the organisation]?

5. I am interested in what life looks like for young women in today's Japan. Can you explain what the challenges and expectations of them are in your view?

6. Do you think that the situation has been changing at all for the better or worse?

7. Longitudinal studies on young women in Japan have indicated increases in rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation within the last few years. What reasons do you think might be behind this?

8. What more would you/your organisation like to see done in order to improve the situation?

9. Is there anything that has not come up in our conversation that you would like to add?

日本語 (Japanese)

1. 簡単な自己紹介をお願いします(お名前、出身、趣味、所属団体の役職など)。

2. 最近の活動や目標に関してお教えください。

3. 団体への所属や活動を始めるきっかけや興味を持った点に関してお教えください。

4. 団体での活動を通して印象に残っている経験はお持ちですか。具体的にお聞かせください。

5. 日本における若い女性の立場や生活(仕事、給与、教育、家庭環境など) に関する問題や今後の見込みに関して可能な範囲でご説明をお願いします。

6. 女性の立場や生活は改善されていると思いますか。または悪化していると思いますか。

7. 近年の研究によると、不安神経症やうつ病によって自殺願望を持ったり、実際に自殺を選んでしまう女性が増加傾向にあるそうです。主な原因は何かあなたの考えをお聞かせください。自由に回答していただいた差し支えありません。

8. これらの状況を改善するためにどのような対策がなされるのが望ましいかお聞かせください。

10. これまでの質問の回答に加えてお話ししたいことやあなたの意見を自由にお聞かせください。

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