

her online performance. The most prominent is using the 'please recommend' hashtag or seeking attribution and acknowledgment from other users on the songs she has made (e.g., "please duet this video" or "please use this song"). This visual language that involves users' time and effort to employ different strategies to become noticed and prominent on the platform, including engaging with the algorithm, can be seen as a new form of self-expression in these short-video format platforms – an *algorithmic fame-seeking* self.

Elevation of the self

An *manga* filter is a micro trend on TikTok that shows users transform into manga characters. Unlike other effects on the app that are applied to users' videos to add flair and customise the individual's face, body, or backdrop, the *AI manga* filter generates a cartoon version of the image. It prompts users to experiment with AI to achieve their desired manga portrait. This entails a challenge for users as they compete to produce the most elevated version of the self. Some observed practices include users who play with AI filters to achieve overly emphasised body attributes, such as young women placing toilet paper rolls or bowls on their chests to get large breasts or men holding an egg carton or bread buns to make AI generate abs and a 'masculine' body.

These are shared as hacks for tricking AI into generating an 'idealised' image and creating content that is intentionally meant to be mimicked and replicated. The trend shows that users strive to fit into prescribed formats of self-presentation to achieve visibility on the platform. However, these playful practices can be read as users' emphasis on the societal bias that the AI filter perpetuates by over-sexualising users' bodies, altering their physical features and appearance, and presenting them as conventionally desirable. Young women intentionally mock big breasts through exaggerated displays to reclaim agency and critique compulsory feminine looks and bodies. Similar instances are found among Japanese young women who used 'eropuri' or erotic photos in *purikura* (photo booths) to

denaturalise sexualised presentation through overtly sexual appearance and manipulation of erotic conventions.³

Self-concealment

Interestingly, the self-fashioning practices originating from *purikura* culture are also used for self-concealment and obscuring one's identity. In some cases, we see how modification and manipulation of facial and bodily features obscure young women's physical characteristics and identity. In this way, enlarged eyes, blurriness, and brightened faces, combined with other visual features and effects, give users control over aspects of personality they want to present to their audience. 'Self as decoration' serves not only to facilitate self-expression through aesthetics, but also to conceal actual identities and make users unknown to the audience. Fabrication and camouflage of one's private or true self can be seen as a way of enabling young women to participate in the culture of public visibility on their terms, especially considering TikTok's emphasis on visibility.

In Japanese virtual space, anonymising and concealing one's appearance is considered an ordinary and culturally situated practice.⁴ Similarly, in TikTok, young women employ different techniques of concealing certain aspects of their identities, using costumes and masks, incorporating cute visual elements, blurring the face or image, avoiding close-ups through certain compositional arrangements, and obscuring one's voice, supported by the centrality of sound effects and lip-syncing on TikTok. Through different strategies to self-disguise and deliberately camouflage their identity, these young women engage in self-fashioning and create an online persona with agency and reality.⁵

However, girls' anonymity practices are not absolute, and they pick and choose the level of anonymity they want to present as part of *self-governed visibility*. This is contingent on users' choices of how much of their 'actual' self they want to share on the app. Japanese TikTok and its visual language entail young women's desire to be seen and validated on the platform, as seen in their intentional



Fig. 3: Japanese girl taking a selfie. (Photo courtesy of Satoshi-K, 2018, iStockphoto)

self-staging to navigate the platform's algorithmic recommender system and various tactics of boosting visibility. Alongside its potential to support young women's creative self-fashioning practices, TikTok is directing identity practices in ways that are profitable to the platform. Often, these practices are characterised by the quantified, standardised presentation of the self, driven by aspirations for social and economic capital.⁶

Although TikTok allows young women in Japan to be creative and embrace their self-expression, the app prioritises conventional and normative ideas of the self and lures users to rework aspects of identities to fit within the standardised frameworks of social identities. Additionally, given their vulnerable role in the Japanese digital economy, young women have a special position in the shift to immaterial forms of labour.⁷ Their work and practices in the online space should not be reduced to frivolous self-promotion; rather, they represent a career and novel form of labour that often has exploitative aspects. My study finds that the visual language of Japanese TikTok entails the duality of discrete self-presenting under the veil of anonymity and users' desire to attract social currency through replicable

and viral trends. All of this is observed as a gendered phenomenon and a continuation of young women's playful use of language via adopting new technology.

Sonja Petrovic is Lecturer/Senior Tutor (Media & Communication) in the School of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne. Email: sonja.petrovic@unimelb.edu.au

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Making Refugees Feel at Home in Japan

Christina Fukuoka and David H. Slater

Japan annually allocates large donations to international organisations and Japanese NGOs' overseas activities to support refugees outside its borders, but there are few organisations that focus on supporting refugees already in Japan. As the number of refugee applicants grows – and as the number of those not accepted due to restrictive immigration policies grows as well – the bureaucratic procedures increasingly treat people as 'cases' rather than as people to be granted asylum, or until the decision is made, as people to support.¹ This interim support is one of the fundamental requirements of all signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which Japan signed in 1981.

Much of the care of asylum seekers, until their cases are reviewed, is outsourced to the few refugee support groups. It usually takes almost three years just for their first application to be reviewed, and then approximately only 1.7 percent between 2017 and 2022 were accepted.² There are many asylum seekers who cannot go back to their home country, and thus they are caught in limbo. Those who work in these support organisations – knowing the poor chance of getting refugee recognition and understanding the lack of support resources available to refugees – are often quite pessimistic, a feeling that is communicated to asylum seekers.

While refugees do not expect much sympathy or care from the immigration

officers, more perplexing is the coldness that many report feeling from the non-profit and non-governmental supporters in Tokyo. Even when providing aid, a lot of the supporters and volunteers from this civil society sector personally distance themselves from refugees – the very people they are there to support – by not making any attempts to engage directly with them.

Ibasho: creating a home in the host society

For any refugee fleeing persecution, 'home' is a complex and often contested notion that differs by nationality, age, gender, and personal biography. 'Home' includes material housing but is also related to the immaterial and intangible senses of belonging and identity.³ It can also encompass 'familiarity,' an in-depth knowledge of the place and people built over time, as well as feelings associated with safety, security, comfort, privacy, and connection.⁴ But the characteristics of home are more complicated for those who experience forced migration. What if one

cannot find a sense of 'home' – a feeling of familiarity, safety, and connection – in their host lands?⁵

Home is not something that can be taken for granted or assumed. It is an ongoing process, a set of practices with a goal of finding connectedness, belonging, and safety. But in the most fundamental sense, the very definition of refugee means being away from, and temporarily without, a home, seeking refuge in a place that is not home. Even without material stability and geographical fixity, refugees and other displaced people still seek these affective qualities – in Japan, we might say 'anzen'

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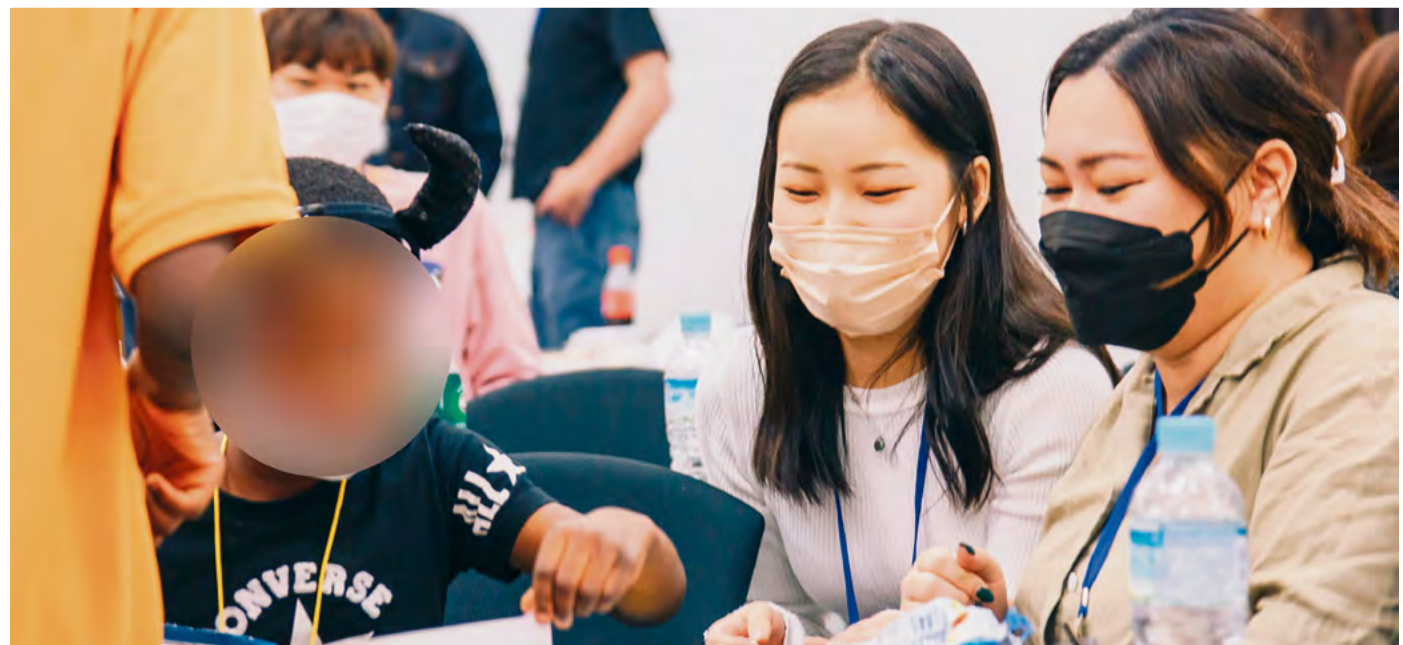


Fig. 1: Playing with children with refugee backgrounds. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2022)

(安全, physical safety) and 'anshin' (安心, emotional security). This is exactly what the word *ibasho* (居場所) points to.

Ibasho is a term that became popular through the neoliberal fragmentation of family and work during the 1990s in Japan. It was a way to identify a collection of immaterial and affective needs that were once taken for granted: the personal, social, and economic grounding in a secure (if at times stifling) Japanese post-war society. *Ibasho* is a term that has no exact equivalent in English as it is used colloquially.

Scholars have defined *ibasho* in multiple ways: "a place where one can feel secure and be oneself", "a place or community where one feels at home"⁶ or even "any place, space, and community where one feels comfortable, relaxed, calm, and accepted by surrounding people."⁷ It is interrelated to one's well-being, identity, and belonging. Some have pointed out that *ibasho* has three elements: it is a physical or virtual place where one feels comfortable, accepted, and secure, where good relationships are found, and marginalised people can envision a future for themselves in the current society.⁸ At best, studies have depicted how *ibasho* can lead to empowerment, serving as a refuge through which the excluded and oppressed can change their society.⁹

Now with the rise of foreign residents and transnational marriages in Japan, the idea of *ibasho* has allowed scholars to recognise and reconceptualise the problems that multicultural students and immigrants face, especially linked to their marginalisation from education and housing in Japan. However, studies on *ibasho* for refugees in Japan – those who seek asylum by crossing international borders – remain scarce.

Sophia Refugee Support Group: a home for female refugees

Refugees are in great need of connection, respect, dignity, and belonging in the unfamiliar and foreign environment of their host country. Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG), a student-run volunteer group based at Sophia University in Tokyo, seeks to provide this. In SRSG, we realised that what is missing



Fig. 2: Bonding at SRSG's Café. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2022)

alongside other direct material support, such as food deliveries and Japanese language classes, is a sense of belonging and place. In short, we seek to provide *ibasho*.

With the goal of creating a more welcoming Japanese society regardless of one's race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender, SRSG has seven main activities to support refugee-migrants in Japan: awareness raising, food deliveries, hygiene deliveries, Japanese language classes, translations for refugee applications, and immigration detention centre visits.¹⁰ To create a sense of *ibasho* where the socially marginalised feel accepted, safe, and connected, SRSG has also been holding informal social gatherings called 'Refugee Cafés' since its establishment in 2017. These informal get-togethers with 40 to

50 refugees and students are held monthly on Sophia University's campus and have a different theme depending on the month. During these Cafés, people are given the opportunity and the safe space to socialize, share, and create new friendships through food and games: a chance to bridge socially and culturally different realities.

Since its establishment, SRSG has supported nearly 300 refugees across Japan. They usually find us by word-of-mouth, through churches and institutional refugee support organisations. Among this number, most of the refugees in Japan, including those who receive SRSG's support, are male. Nevertheless, SRSG strives to create a space for our female refugee friends through these Cafés, which often become the only place in their lives where they can interact with others. The majority of SRSG's student members are female, so we are able to create intimate gendered bonds across otherwise contrasting life experiences. It was our female members who realised the need for personal hygiene care, including sanitary napkins, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, we began the assembly and delivery of hygiene products to those who could not leave their homes, and we continue sending out these packages today.

Cafés are also a place where the women refugees can more easily talk with refugee men. As other places, including the scattered refugee communities, are often dominated by men, Cafés serve as a place where refugees, both women and men, can openly speak about their experiences with compatriots but also with members of the host society, on

an equal footing. Additionally, many student members in SRSG are mixed-race (ハーフ, *hāfu*), have experience crossing borders and returning to Japan (帰国子女, *kikokushijo*), or are exchange students (留学生, *ryūgakusei*). While we are in no way comparing the scope of the challenges of our experiences to that of our refugee friends, the experience of displacement and alienation is not completely unfamiliar to most of us.

During SRSG's Cafés, people are given the time and platform to share and listen to other participants' stories about their homelands—including Japan—and their current situation. An Iranian refugee spoke about the brave young women in her home country who are challenging religious oppression. Another refugee shared updates on the 2021 military coup d'état that continues to affect Myanmar. While to most people in Japan, these are far-away happenings, such events are a reality for our refugee friends and their loved ones. Sharing stories is an opportunity to talk about loved ones and share some of the reasons they have ended up so far away from home.

Christina Fukuoka graduated from Sophia University, Japan and will be a graduate student at EMMIR (an Erasmus Mundus programme) from 2024.
Email: christina.f.srsg@gmail.com

David H. Slater is a Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Sophia University, Japan.
Email: dhslater@gmail.com

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Fig. 3 (above): Celebrating a refugee's birthday at SRSG's Café. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2023)

Fig. 4 (right): Female Iranian refugee singing in Persian. (Photo by Shota Nagao, 2022)



Notes

- https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/07_00035.html
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