

“May I know who is on the line?”: Technology consumption, mobile telephony and the gender question

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Abstract

The paper makes a contribution to gender and technology studies and offers a contemporary critique of patriarchal forms and expressions in the information age. Amidst an ambient optimism for the potential of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the advancement of women especially in the developing world, this paper sharpens focus on mobile telephony to draw attention to the reproduction of hegemonic patriarchy that persists within them. While dominant discourses around gender and technology building up to techno feminism tend to present themselves as temporally superseding and reactionary to each other, this paper revisits them to observe how each of them remains relevant, co-existent, intertwined or conflicting in understanding the positing of information and communication technology and its leaping innovations within contemporary gender discourse and complexity.

Keywords: Mobile telephony, social construction of technology, gendered technology

An advantage of brain over brawn and structure of networks instead of hierarchy is what largely valorises digital technology as capable of heralding new relationships between women and machines. However, standing tall at one end is a persisting technological divide that quite confidently places women on the side of a compromised understanding of technology.

Technological ability itself is gendered in this formulation, where technological mastery is a

masculine characteristic and conversely, technological inability a feminine one. Women are for the most part passive consumers in the chain of production and use of technology, especially in the case of information technology.

In attempting to trace briefly the trajectory of the discourse on techno-feminism over the past few decades, this essay borrows from other scholarly work such as that of Wajcman (2007) and Ganito (2010). Liberal feminism, which gained momentum in the 1970s-80s, accorded and accepted an inherent value of neutrality in science, and sought solutions in terms of access, i.e. getting more women to enter science and technology (emphasising different socialisation processes and equal opportunity policies). A critique of this found voice in the accusation that such theorisation, with its focus on gender stereotypes and customary expectations, only served to deny the existence of sex differences between women and men, and in fact relocated the problem as lying within the women themselves. Both radical and social feminism then brought focus on the gendered nature of technology itself in the very way it was conceptualised and produced. For the radical feminists, gender was highlighted in the difference, with concern expressed for the male values that dominated the development of technology and making a call out for women to be better served by current technologies. Socialist feminists, with their focus on the machinery of production and use of a historical perspective to bear on the analysis of men's monopoly of technology, saw gender as not the exclusive basis of all oppression. Socialist feminism asserts that technology is definitely socially shaped, but shaped by men for the exclusion of women.

Wajcman (2007) argues that all of these approaches missed out on unravelling the prospects that technology held out for women –just not enough attention was paid to women's agency. And it is that which prompted some contemporary feminist writers such as Haraway to urge an embracing of the positive potential of science and technology. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1983), a theory defined by her as one of wholes and part, is understood to be a critique of the traditional notions of feminism in which she prompts academics to begin theorising about the digital body as virtual and physical identities became blurred. Since the 1990s -2000s, Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies have increasingly theorised an evolution of technology and gender as mutually shaped. In her own work, Wajcman (*ibid.*) introduces techno-feminism which seeks to bring out the significant aspect of this relationship as a co-production of gender and technology which does not end with the innovation and design process, but emphasises the connectedness of all phases of technological development. Authors such as Lauretis (2004: 12)

propose that technologies of gender concern themselves “not only with how the representation of gender is constructed by the given technology, but also how it becomes absorbed subjectively by each individual whom that technology addresses”.

Within various digital technologies, the added appeal of mobile phones is located variously in their transcendence of spatial and temporal as well as of social boundaries that separate public space from private space (Archambault, 2011; Lee Dong-Hoo, 2005); in the privacy and anonymity they afford toward new behaviours and spaces; and in blurring institutional boundaries between the domestic and work worlds (Rakow and Navarro, 1993). What makes a mobile phone even more significant in this context is its multi-functionalism – it is at once a radio, telecommunications device, a camera, a storage disk and several possible other things.

Rai (2012) draws us into a theorisation that extends beyond the ‘becoming’ of the artefact into an entire ecology of mobile phones. According to Rai (2012):

the reason the diagram of the mobile ecology is different from the landline, the STD booth, the TV, or radio is that it traverses singularities of emergent capacities and speeds of flows, and involves these fluxes in the production of a new ecology of sensation, the individuation of which can be experimented with bodily, intensively, by modulating these processes of individuation.

With particular reference to gender dynamics, several studies are bringing in empirical evidence to argue that these new users of ICTs are, in many cases, asserting their agency in using the mobile phone in ways that have previously been unarticulated or unintended by the inventor. Within this, working systematically at one end are market surveys that constantly seek to establish usage patterns of mobile phones in terms of age, gender, socio-economic profiles etc. in order to feed into the development of specific features for consumer target groups. At the other, is a growing body of research work across global geographical and cultural contexts that is serving to bring to the fore the differences in male versus female use of mobile telephony. Through the study on the sociocultural practices and meanings ascribed to mobile phones in a low-income neighbourhood in Southern Brazil, Silva (2014) argues that while mobile phones engender conditions in which men and women interact in sociocultural dynamics that may reproduce gender hierarchies, they also hold the potential to subvert them.

Two dominant trajectories are clearly identifiable here– one that looks at how technology is gendered, and another that tries to focus on the experience-based usage of technology (and thereby its construction) by women. Both are useful in engaging in a discussion about gender in

mobile phone cultures. When viewed through the lens of the former, a cell phone in the possession of a woman is essentially a mobile device with the mobile body of a female. The ban in 2012 by a self-appointed village council of Sunderbari in the state of Bihar¹ on the use of mobile phones by unmarried women and girls, also by married women when indoors or in the presence of other family members points to one of the most direct implications of this placement². This, with the unsurprising argument that mobile phones accorded increased communication to women and were leading to immoral relationships outside of the community as well as outside of marriages. In his paper based on work in North India, Doron (2007) draws attention to this projection of a personal mobile phone with a woman as an object of distrust, citing examples of daughters-in-law forbidden from continuing with the same mobile connection that they used in their natal homes. Other case studies (Silva, *ibid*) in the field from various countries indicate how certain women experience increased and stressful surveillance because of mobile phones, wherein their husbands ring them incessantly only to keep a tab on where they are.

The same physical mobility of the device with the body is also projected as a weapon for safety, with a number of mobile apps being developed to help women reach out to friends and helplines in times of danger/assault through the use of the mobile. One is yet to find enough statistical data to prove how effective or ineffective or possibly erroneous/misused the utilisation of these apps has been. In exploring how women's claim to public space in the city gets shaped, Phadke et al. (2011) refer to women who use a personal engagement with the mobile phone as a mechanism to ward off undesirable attention in public spaces. Working at another end of the spectrum are apps³ that invite citizens to provide data on the extent and nature of crimes in their neighbourhoods, with the intention to provide a comprehensive mapping of grades of crime and safety across the city. Apart from their disturbing potential to colour certain neighbourhoods and

¹ Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Kishanganj-village-bans-useof-cellphones-by-girls/articleshow/17471655.cms> A similar diktat was issued by a caste body in Odisha in 2011. Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Orissa-body-bans-mobiles-among-girls/articleshow/8907452.cms?> [Accessed on 12th September 2014]

² Implicit to this directness is a hint at the entire range and levels of restrictions possibly in play to curb the freedom of women to own and use a mobile device.

³ Such as mylocalcrime and citizencop.

localities as ambiently dangerous, how this ready reckoner to crime and danger in turn affects women's freedom to traverse the city is yet to be seen. The deployment of mobile phones in this 'defence' rhetoric through their connotation as weapons, or as a means for creating information-charged barricading against possible threats to safe manoeuvre place them amidst the larger, more profoundly worrisome context of the construction of public spaces and women's presence in them as one where the latter has to validate itself in the former through a constant quest for respectability and legitimate purpose.

Moving on, a mobile phone is also a mobile device outside a woman's body, i.e. as much in possession of other individuals that make up the social as well as physical experience of her everyday lived life. Thus while mobile phones are especially underscored for their blurring of public space and private space, it is the same that poses the greatest threat to her sense of security. In its compact multi-functionalism, the mobile phone camouflages its destructive ability to constantly record data and deploy it for subjugation/domination. Their offer of anonymity, automation and opportunity of distanced attack, along with affordability and propagation are identified by Radloff (2013) as the major attributes of ICTs that perpetuate abuse and are changing the way that women experience violence.

The question of access is resurrected both in terms of women's participation in the production of digital technology as well as the manner in which the technological product is made available for personalised use to women. Furthermore, even when women can own or use mobile phones and other technologies with ease and the support of their communities, their needs are not represented in the end products because women are often excluded from the production of ICTs, thereby resulting in services and software that may not serve to advance women. Field research is bringing in a lot of substantiating evidence that political and social structures play a very detrimental role in women's access to ICTs, and thereby ICTs can potentially create greater gender marginality. The essay now takes up a couple of contemporary examples, selected largely to highlight the manner in which the smartness/intelligence and handiness of mobile phones, and the gender lop-sidedness in their technical as well as cultural production is working to both perpetuate and create new patriarchal hierarchies, and are deployed sometimes as a simple extension of the male gaze.

Titstare:

Titstare is a mobile application that was introduced in 2013 at the TechCrunch Disrupt Hackathon⁴. Titstare was described by its makers, a twenty-something Australian designer duo, as "... an app where you take photos of yourself staring at tits." The launch was followed by an outrage on social media⁵. The reactions ranged from laments about how it was yet another product of the 'brogrammer'⁶ culture that has been hotly posited as a systemic problem in the American tech industry, to it being another practice of objectifying the female body, where the male gaze is recorded and the female body, or rather specific parts of it, are distributed as a consumable, with legitimacy accorded by its formal development into an app (simultaneous to a notion of triviality as it being 'just another app'). Expectedly, at the other end was disappointment at the inability of women 'to take a joke', asking them to loosen up in their acceptance of such male engagement.

Let us now pick up on a trail of events post the Titstare launch. TechCrunch posted a formal apology⁷ on its web site, calling the presentation "misogynistic" and acknowledging, "Sexism is a major problem in the tech industry." Pat Dickinson, partner in a start-up called Glimpse-Labs, and chief technology officer of the news site Business Insider, then made it to the news for writing in, "It is not misogyny to tell a sexist joke, or to fail to take a woman seriously, or to enjoy boobies." As expressed in an article in the New York Times dated April 2014⁸. this

⁴ An entrepreneur platform, which was the same event where another app 'Circle Shake' was introduced, with its maker demonstrating the product by simulating masturbation on stage.

⁵ Much of which can be captured through a simple google search in the name of the app.

⁶ An amalgamation of qualitative characteristics of nerdiness + alpha maleness, and more technically, of the words 'programmer' and 'bro'; the latter a term of endearment members of fraternities in American universities and party enthusiasts use to refer to each other. This rises beyond identifying the frugal representation of women in technology as a supply problem (availability of a much smaller pool of qualified and interested women), or generated from wider societal issues, to bring attention to the sexist culture that dominates participation in this particular profession.

⁷ "An Apology From TechCrunch"; Posted by Tsotsis, A. Eldon, E (Sep 2013) Retrieved from <http://techcrunch.com/2013/09/08/an-apology-from-techcrunch/> [Accessed on 7th September 2014]

⁸ Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/technology/technologys-man-problem.html?_r=0. [Accessed on 7th September 2014]

again played out interestingly as his business partner, Ms. Shevinsky quit the company in offence over her partner's public views on the Titstare incident. She was soon to rejoin it later upon insistence of Pat Dickinson, with certain terms and conditions laid out which included a confirmation that all of his public statements would be sanctioned and signed off by her first and that more women be included on the Board.

The article highlights several contradictions and complexities inherent to the participation of women in computer-engineering technology, especially programming. These are apparent by the select listing of some of the statements made by or about the author throughout the feature (reproduced here):

It was about computer-engineering culture and her relationship with it. She had enjoyed being “one of the bros” — throwing back whiskey and rubbing shoulders with M.I.T. graduates. And if that sometimes meant fake-laughing as her colleagues cracked jokes about porn, so be it.

“For years, all I wanted to do was work and code and make software,” she said in an interview. “That’s why I didn’t care about feminism. I just wanted to build stuff.”

“My general issue with the coverage of women in tech is that women in the technology press are talked about in the context of being women, and men are talked about in the context of being in technology,” said a technical woman who would speak only on condition of anonymity because she did not want to be part of an article about women in tech. “I’m also very good at my job, and as a technologist, I want to be recognized for that and not because I have breasts.”

Identifying critical issues in Ms. Shevinsky's interview is not so difficult. She herself coughs up the problematic through the various statements she makes –that she would have nothing to do with feminism because of a more unadulterated desire to partake in the building of the technology itself. In saying that, she directly pitches the two at opposing ends to each other. Her perpetuating of computer engineering culture as symbolised by performances of masculinity or endorsements of it, reinforces the argument of cultural techno feminism that technology is culturally created in symbols and meanings as essentially masculine.

Through the accounts of several female employees, the configurational (social, cultural, physical, associational) space of start-ups is being especially highlighted for their dominant sexist nature. Populated largely by young people with an almost normative culture of putting in long hours amidst founders and employees, who are often assembled by looping in likeminded friends, this

arena is where lines between work and social life are understood to be highly blurred, and desirably so. Of greater concern is the fact that these start-ups pride themselves on a lack of bureaucracy, which often implies an absence of big-company layers such as human resources departments.

The above-mentioned article helps highlight the strong differences of opinion, even among women in tech, about how to make the culture more welcoming. While some continue to push for increased employment of women as engineers at the founding of a company, in management and in conducting of job interviews, others advocate creating women-only tech events and programmes. Several denounce this constant highlighting of sexism, making a case for bringing out positive examples as encouragement to women's participation. This case study finds a fair amount of consonance with the critique of liberal feminism of the 1970s-80s which emphasised that technologies had a masculine image, not only because they were dominated by men, but because they worked to incorporate symbols, metaphors and values that have masculine connotations (Wajcman 2004). Sex-stereotyping of technology served to discourage women from entering technology as an activity, or rather the world of technology as a cosmos, doing so only at the risk of forsaking their femininity. The statistics of participation of women in the creation of digital technology in India mirror a similar scenario. A report by WageIndicator (2012) revealed the ICT industry in India to be highly male dominated and reflective of a gender pay gap between males and females to the tune of about 29%. The reasons attributed to this were the underrepresentation of women in supervisory positions as compared to non-supervisory ones, perceptions about women's limited capabilities and societal and familial pressures that prevent them from productive and committed inputs in terms of time and effort, and also the added cost that ensuring compliance to women's safety brings on to the organisations. Moreover, the percentage of women employed in the IT industry in India has actually decreased from 26% in 2010 to 22% in 2012 even though the number of jobs created in this sector continues to increase annually.

Japanese Dating Sim Games

The second example comes from none other than the technology-high, gizmo-wonderland of Japan. This is the country that is now worrying about a declining birth rate and a supposedly

disturbing decline in ‘carnal desires’ of its young men. In the second article⁹ BBC’s Anita Rani quotes a member of the Japan Family Planning Association, as describing many young Japanese men as ‘herbivores’ - passive and lacking carnal desire. The larger article is a feature on the rising relationships between Japanese men and their virtual girlfriends.

Rani describes the growing *Otaku* culture in Japanese men, where an increasing number of Japanese men are choosing to engage in continued, clandestine relationships with virtual girlfriends. Interestingly, *Otaku*, a Japanese term originally referring to ‘another house’ or ‘another family’, has taken on a very derogatory connotation in contemporary time, now being indicative of an undesirable condition of being at home for the lack of any other social life. While *Otaku* is deployed in reference to a type of geek, however, it could also refer to *anime* or *manga* fans. *Manga* in Japanese refers to comics and cartooning, and are thus reproduced as two-dimensional print products. *Anime* are animations, and in show format. Both *manga* and *anime* are globally deployed to specifically indicate Japanese-stylised and Japanese-disseminated comics and animation. With their long standing and widespread proliferation and patronage in Japanese society, *manga* and *anime* have been widely discussed for their boxed demographics, and their discrete yet blurring categorisations in terms of gender and age¹⁰.

Dating sim games in Japan present an interface of both *manga* and *anime* (although it is commonly *manga* that are developed into *anime*). Taylor (2007) distinguishes dating sim games from other video games for remaining largely two-dimensional, even while the medium offered the scope for richer three dimensional graphic content. The author attributes this to dating-sim games’ greater focus on characters. For long after they were introduced in the 1980’s, dating sim games remained confined to the Japanese video and computer game market, but of late, they are taking form as websites and mobile apps too.

9 Rani A. (2013) ‘The Japanese men who prefer virtual girlfriends to sex’. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24614830>. [Accessed on 9th September 2014]

10 Amongst the four broad categories of manga, Shonen was initially just manga for youth, which then got gradually transformed to a demographic of young men, where Shojo crawled in to take the thus generated vacuum for similar work that catered to young women. Shojo is meant for girls or ‘about to be adult women’, Sienen for the intended demographic of men aged between 18-40 and Josei is manga for adult women written with much higher maturity levels.

It is easy to identify a fairly significant difference in the manner and mould in which these games are created and offered for use to men and women. In a study on Japanese dating sim games, Taylor (ibid: p. 198)¹¹ suggests that while the female characters in them include both complex and simple figures, male characters are “... essentially empty shells. They are characterized not by their personalities but by their lack thereof, have no outstanding traits or personalities, are mediocre students, and are not especially popular with women.”

In 2008, Webkare (translating into web boyfriend), a combination social networking site and online game¹² in which young Japanese women attempt to hook up with one of four *anime* suitors found instant and widespread success in user proliferation. Here, players interact with their virtual crushes through short cartoon sequences that allow for very little actual interaction. Important events in the storyline are saved digitally in a memories album on the site. More recent in this category are the ‘*otome*’ - a range of romance apps by Japanese app developer Voltage that target young Japanese women. While acknowledging that dating games in Japan were long confined to men and boys, these *otomes* are described by their makers as a response to the identification of a potent market considering the widespread use of mobile phones amongst young women.

Virtual companions are not a new concept in Japan, a country known for the widespread acceptance of virtual pets and virtual children. Also, this life with the virtual partner is virtual at various levels- the technology itself as well as the construction of the self that is a protagonist in the virtual life of virtual love offered by the virtual technology. Men in their late thirties are sometimes actually high school students in this game. While rendering their real life existence as an ‘other’, what is more strongly coded is the otherness of real women in Japan – wives, girlfriends, potential partners, or even none of the above. A particular quote by a young Japanese man featured in Rani’s article referred to Japanese women as ‘3D women’. These real life women

11 Various dating sim types are identified by the author as: bishojo games, in which a playable male character interacts with attractive anime-style girls; GxB or otome games, where a playable female character dates male characters; and BL (‘boys’ love) games, where the characters are homosexual. Bishojo games are the most common.

¹² <http://web-kare.jp/>. [Accessed on 9th September 2014]

are represented as demanding – emotionally, physically, materially, with a relationship with them culminating most often, and undesirably, in marriage.

In an online media article¹³ that ponders on whether and how the Japanese dating-sim games would be able to tap into the western market, lifestyle journalist Dickson points to the distortion in the fact that despite *otome*'s staunchly asexual character in view of the fact that they are ideally aimed at younger Japanese women who may not have had a sexual experience before, the CEO of Voltage claimed that many *otome* games are actually played by much older women. In the same article, the author further identifies the element of rape fantasy and non-consensuality, which runs throughout even SFW¹⁴ as the most problematic trope associated with *otome* games, not to mention *manga* and *anime* in general. This could be identified in their constant resurrections of 'shy, weak-willed female protagonists swept off their feet by eerie, verbally abusive, high-cheekboned androgynes'. Dickson also had the CEO elaborate that the North American releases would 'de-stress' the damsel-in-distress trope to give form to more independent female characters and more masculine men.

However, Rani's article seems to point at a more serious and immediate construction of the virtual girlfriends in the life of the Japanese men. This is done by simultaneous highlighting of the fact in several surveys that even when Japanese men and women are in relationships, they have very little sex. This construction and the seemingly nationalist concerns that accompany it are deeply patriarchal. By suggesting that one of the reasons that Japanese men are taking to a virtualisation of their intimate world is as an escape from committed relationships, and that too because many young Japanese men are pessimistic about the future pushes forth the conception that it is the men who are torchbearers of secure national futures. The discussion takes an even more sinister tone when this so called disillusionment of young Japanese men is seen to contribute to a demographic plunge, putting the future of an entire nation at stake. The article lacks an acknowledgement whatsoever of the possible effects that this entire phenomenon has

¹³ Retrieved from <http://www.dailydot.com/technology/voltage-japanese-romance-simulators/>. [Accessed on 13th September 2014]

¹⁴ Internet slang or shorthand for Safe for Work.

on the citizenship and participation of women in the ideation of a national future. This is corroborated by Taylor (ibid: 103) as well in saying that:

The interconnection between fantasy and reality is a key element of otaku culture. As a rejection of societal expectations for them to get married and support a household, an ideal based on the salaryman figure (the man who dedicates himself to his company to support his family), otaku choose instead to delve into a fantasy world of anime, manga, and video games.

Many otaku claim that they express themselves better through computers and virtual identities than they do in real life; for these people, their virtual self is the 'real them,' continuing to blur the line between fantasy and reality. Like young women who delay marriage and become 'parasite singles,' otaku may also hold full-time jobs—but their income goes toward consuming fantasy in the form of dating-sim games, trips to maid cafés, anime and manga paraphernalia, and so on. Otaku therefore represent a rejection of adulthood by resisting work, women, and the salaryman ideal.

Urged by a perceived dubiousness of some of the comments on Japan's social situation, a blog article¹⁵ works to dismantle the bearings of Rani's proposition. By first attempting to draw possible correlations between increased levels of education and low birth-rates, the author eventually tries to drive home the point that low birth-rates could be attributed to various reasons, that they were not unique to Japan, and certainly could not be attributed to the apparent lack of interest in sex. He points to ethno-centrism by arguing instead that talking about a lack of enough sex in eastern cultures was a western obsession to derive a contrast with their own societies.

In conclusion

Using mobile telephony in focus and as a point of entry, the above illustrations highlight how the discourses on technology and feminism remain both complicated in themselves and inter-twined, owing to the simultaneous realities they bring into this context, as also in each setting itself up as

¹⁵ By Japanese author, blogger and YouTuber, Yuta Aoki. Retrieved from <http://www.yutaaoki.com/blog/top5-mistakes-journalists-make-about-sexless-japan>. [Accessed on 14th September 2014]

solutioning or interjecting in the face of the problematic of the other (such as measures to correct male dominance in tech by ensuring women's presence in critical work profiles, or in the promotion of women-only tech events). This may render the very effort of examining the relationship between mobile phones and gender inequality as inadequate, reductionist and futile, considering the number of other social, cultural and material variables actively in play. However, while reflecting both the positive and negative potentiality of digital technology at large, mobile phones present a special case for attention due to their exponential rates of user proliferation. Greater attention is sought towards unravelling the negative social impacts of mobile technology, especially in their implication in perpetuating gender inequalities and reinforcing gender stereotypes and power equations, and the resulting violence against women. The issues vary geographically and culturally, as brought out by various case studies emerging from across the globe. Furthermore, it feels valid enough to agree with Wajcman (2004) that while women have been actively engaged in constructing hybrid transgendered identities through their consumption of new media, the possibility for and the fluidity of gender discourse in the virtual world is constrained by the material world.

Annexures:

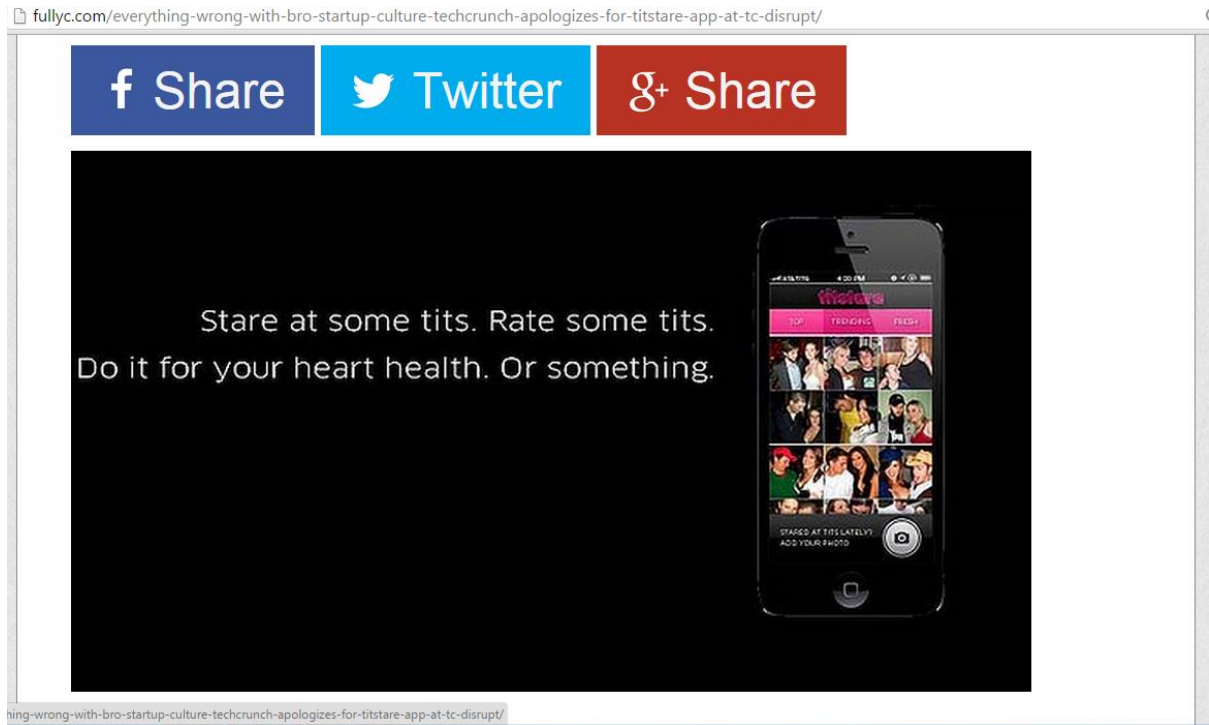


Figure: Promotional material for Titstare.

Source: <http://fullyc.com/everything-wrong-with-bro-startup-culture-techcrunch-apologizes-for-titstare-app-at-tc-disrupt/>

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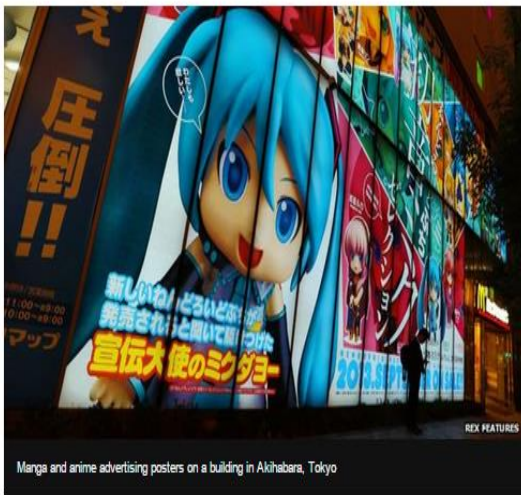
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Magazine

The Japanese men who prefer virtual girlfriends to sex

By Anita Rani
Presenter, This World

24 October 2013 Magazine




Manga and anime advertising posters on a building in Akihabara, Tokyo

Unless something happens to boost Japan's birth rate, its population will shrink by a third between **In today's Magazine**

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28 March 2015

Features & Analysis



Drum roll
The six-second solo that's been copied in 1,500 songs

Figure: BBC article on Japanese men's companionship preferences.

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24614830>

www.dailydot.com/technology/voltage-japanese-romance-simulators/

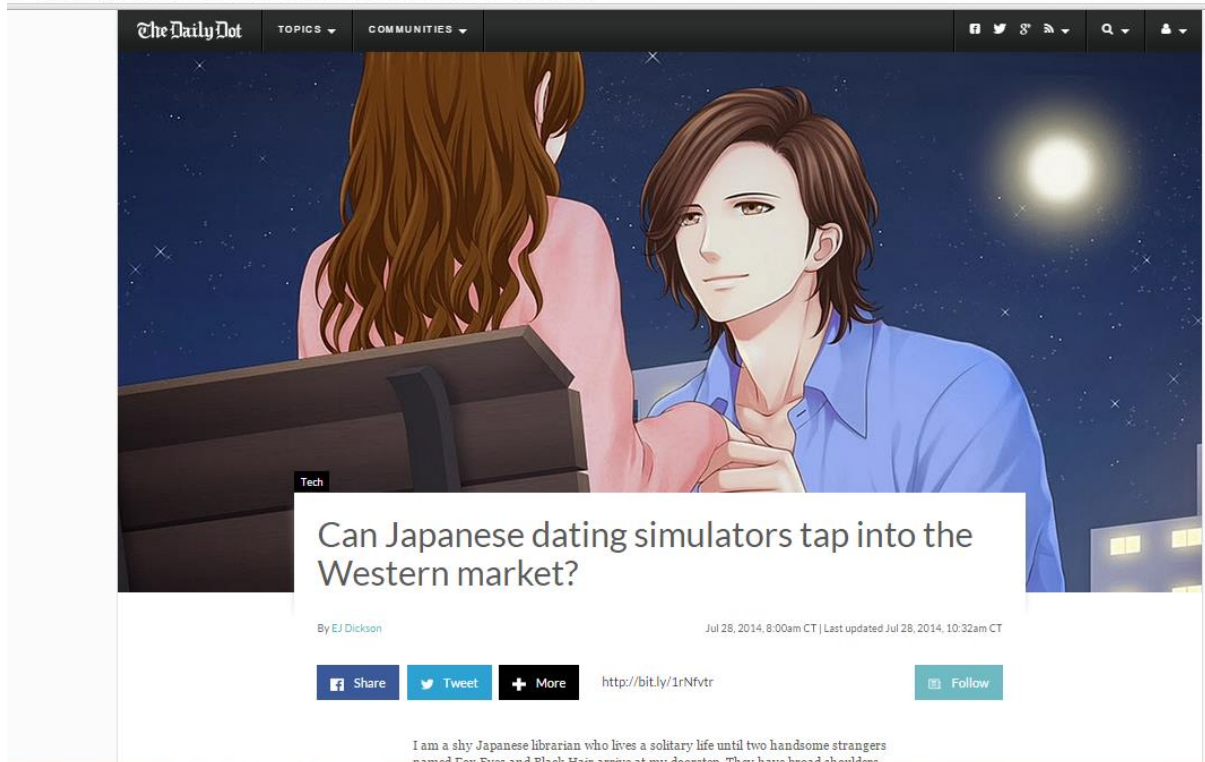


Figure: Graphic from a Japanese dating sim game.

Source: <http://www.dailydot.com/technology/voltage-japanese-romance-simulators/>

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