

SEX WORKERS' SELF-REPRESENTATION: UNIQUE RESPONSES TO SEXUAL NORMS ON YOUTUBE VIDEOS BY JAPANESE SEX WORKERS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History:</p> <p>Received 15.08.2025 Accepted 15.10.2025 Published 25.11.2025</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <p>Sex Workers, Social Media, Sexual Norms, Self-Representation</p>	<p><i>Social media have opened various opportunities for sex workers—a socially marginalized group—to share their voice, express resistance against discrimination, and get financial opportunities aside from sex work. However, according to previous research, social media is not necessarily a place that is free from the sexual norms that construct sex workers as “deviants.” Then, how do sex workers survive within such oppression? What does it mean for sex workers to survive in that context? To answer these questions, this paper will use YouTube videos made by Japanese sex workers as data. First, it will be discussed how these videos can be seen as sexual even though they talk about non-sexual topics, and how they attract heterosexual male viewers. This will be achieved by reference to the video descriptions and earlier research on pornography. Then, this paper will use iconology as a method to clarify why the videos are not directly sexually explicit. Finally, by drawing on the concept of performativity, this paper suggests the potential significance of sex workers’ presence on YouTube. For this process, the videos from Honshi ni natte kuremasuka? a YouTube channel operated by Japanese female sex workers are used. Specifically, the videos were posted between March 2021 and November 2023 and were on the subject of “foot massages.” The significance of this study lies in bringing into academic discussion the behaviours and expressions of sex workers who do not—or cannot—make political claims, such as those found in rights movements often addressed in previous research. In doing so, it aims to build a new theoretical foundation for understanding how sex workers represent themselves online in contemporary society.</i></p>

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1. Introduction

Social media have opened various opportunities for sex workers—a socially marginalized group—to share their voice, express resistance for discrimination, and get financial opportunities aside from sex work. However, social media is not necessarily a place that is free from the sexual norms that deem sex workers “deviants.” Previous research has indicated that social media can function as a site where discriminatory discourse against sex

workers is produced. It has been also pointed out that the operation of these platforms works to exclude sex workers as users (Coombes et al. 2022; Webber 2024). In this context, how do sex workers survive? What does it mean for sex workers to survive in such an oppressive environment?

To answer these questions, this paper focuses on three YouTube videos on the subject of “Foot Massage” by Japanese female sex workers. First, it is examined how these videos make sexually interpretable representations despite dealing with non-sexual subjects. Then, by applying the theory of iconology, this paper will clarify the meaning of these videos in light of the social context in which they were created. Finally, by drawing on the concept of performativity, it is suggested that the act of sex workers making themselves visible in public spaces has the potential to subvert the norms that view them as deviant.

Sex work, broadly understood, refers to the exchange of sexual services, performances, or visual materials for money or other forms of compensation (Smith & Mac 2020: 1). While research has historically explored various facets of sex work, the advent of digital platforms has introduced new complexities, necessitating an understanding of online practices within the field. This paper, however, distinguishes its focus from direct transactional sex work facilitated online. Instead, it examines how individuals who are currently or have formerly been engaged in the sex industry utilize platforms like YouTube primarily for self-expression, community building, and income generation through non-sexual content, rather than for advertising or directly performing sex work.

There are several previous studies on the voices of sex workers in Japan, most of them dealing with their rights movements (e.g., Fujime 1997; Mizushima 2009). On the other hand, few studies have focused on social media in Japan, despite its meteoric rise in usage since the 2000s. This paper focuses on sex workers’ “voice” through social media. The reason for this lies in one of the defining characteristics of social media—it requires neither specialised skills nor significant financial investment from users, and allows them to disseminate information while remaining anonymous. By these points, social media has created new opportunities for expression, even for socially marginalized groups such as sex workers (Shiratsuchi 2024: 53, 58).

As mentioned above, social media affords sex workers social and financial opportunities, yet at the same time operates as a mechanism of oppression and exclusion. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Japanese female sex workers—individuals currently or formerly engaged in the sex industry—within this contradictory terrain of social media, negotiate modes of self-representation and mobilize these platforms as potential resources for visibility and income generation, separate from direct engagement in transactional sex work.

Among the many social media platforms, this paper focuses on the video-sharing platform YouTube for two reasons. First, video is a medium that can convey a great deal of information through a complex combination of overlapping text, sound, and visual media (Sasaki 2005; 120–130). When sex workers share videos, they combine multiple elements in many cases. Focusing on why they choose specific forms of expression allows us to understand their messages within their social and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, because YouTube is the world’s largest video-sharing platform with a vast user base, its operations are inevitably influenced to some extent by prevailing social norms. This characteristic makes it a valuable site for examining how sex workers’ expressions on social media intersect with norms.

The interpretation of representations in the videos applies the theory of iconology which was systematized by art historian Erwin Panofsky ([1939] 1972: 1-8). This is a study of works of art that “starts from known data and searches for the essential meaning of works by comprehensively reconstructing the various factors that make it possible, i.e., historical, social, and cultural factors” (Wakakuwa [1993] 2022: 19).

According to Panofsky, before conducting iconological analysis, the observer must recognize two levels of *meaning* in the subject. First, there is *primary* or *natural meaning* which consists of two components: *factual meaning*, which is recognized by visual colours and lines, and *expressional meaning*, which is recognized by psychological nuances. To use Panofsky's example, this process involves recognising the information “there is a man in front of me,” “He is taking off his hat” and “he is smiling” through visual perception.

This is followed by *secondary* or *conventional meaning*, which is understood based on a certain custom. In the case of the example, recognising that “he is greeting me” corresponds to this process. It is impossible to understand this second meaning without sharing with that acquaintance the western custom of taking off one's hat as a greeting.

After recognising these two *meanings*, *intrinsic meaning* or *content* must be understood based on the various conditions such as the period, class, occupation, and intellectual tradition to which the observed object belongs. In the example from earlier, recognising that “this man has a gentlemanly personality” corresponds to this third process. And this is precisely what iconology is. In other words, it is the process of interpreting the comprehensive meaning of an icon in light of the historical, social, and cultural factors behind its birth and establishment.

YouTube videos tend to contain more text than paintings and sculptures. Therefore, in this paper, the first step of *natural meaning*, the main focus is not to confirm the subject of the videos, but to clarify “how the subject is represented,” paying attention to the placement of the performers, their outfits, and editing.

Then, by comparing the content of the description with the discussion of adult videos adjacent to the sex industry, it will be described how the videos have the potential for sexual interpretation and how male viewers can identify themselves with the male performers (*conventional meaning*).

As a final step, it will be examined the significance of the meaning that the videos do not directly indicate sexuality, even though their expressions attract the sexual interest of heterosexual men, in light of the social condition related to YouTube and sex workers (*intrinsic meaning*). Here, owing to space limitations, this paper does not address cultural conditions.

2. The YouTube Channel *Honkure* and “Foot Massage” Videos

Honkure is a YouTube channel run by female sex workers who are or have been engaged with Japan's legal sex industry. The channel's videos are shot in live-action, and the members of the channel disclose their faces and their business names as sex workers. According to the channel founder Mariten, their videos are based on the concept of an “erotic variety show” and primarily target middle-aged male audiences. (Mariten 2025: 149).

This paper focuses on the channel's “foot massage” videos. In those videos, members of the channel undergo foot massages that are said to be extremely painful, and their reactions such as screaming or writhing in pain are shown as entertainment. In *Honkure*, at least five “foot massage” videos have been shared and the details of each are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : “Foot Massage” Videos by *Honkure*

Order	Video Title	Members	Uploaded Year/month/day
#1	Unknown (Not available for viewing as of June 2025)	Mariten / Suzu	2020 Spring
#2	“Extream pain! Foot Massage Completely Breaks Our Character!”	Mariten / Suzu	2021/3/18
#3	“Noooo!! This Foot Massage Broke Us Completely.....”	Mariten / Tōko	2022/1/22
#4	“Savage Foot Massage Sends Overconfident Members Straight to Hell!”	Mariten / Ruruka / Ao	2022/11/26
#5	“Agony!! Final Screams of the Year in Our Foot Massage Showdown!”	Mariten / Ruruka	2024/12/17

Source: Author's elaboration based on *Honkure*

Episodes 1 through 4 feature a male therapist from the reflexology clinic performing foot massages on the channel's cast members. Only in Episode 5 do members Mariten and Ruruka give each other foot massages. This time, the massage scenes from Episodes 2 through 4 (referred to as Videos #2, #3, and #4) will be focused.

These three videos were selected as data for the following reasons: first, as of June 2025, they are all public and accessible to the author; second, the content—professional therapist performing foot massages on participants—is a highly common format that appears across many other YouTube channels and television programs; and most importantly, the fact that similar videos have been posted multiple times on *Honkure* suggests that they hold particular significance within the creators' body of work.

Incidentally, the projects of converting the reactions of performers receiving foot massages into content is not limited to *Honkure*, but is also used in TV variety shows and on other YouTube channels. For example, a male YouTubers' group treats “foot massage” as the material for an “endurance competition” or a female actor receives it as a form of “health promotion” (HikakinTV 2022; Kawaguchi Haruna Official Hāchannel 2021). How, then, does *Honkure*—advertised as an “erotic variety show”—articulate this theme? This question will be examined in the following sections.

3. The *natural meaning*: “foot massage” as a subject and how it is represented

In this section, it will be focused on the on-screen placement of the performers, their outfits, and the stickers added by video editing for the three videos in *Honkure*. According to these elements, it will be explained how the subject, “foot massage,” is represented in those videos.

First, the on-screen arrangement of the performers in Video #2 and Video #3 are generally the same as follows. The member receiving treatment is positioned in the left half of the screen, sitting on a chair with her head pointing to the upper left of the screen and her feet pointing to the lower right of the screen. On the other hand, the therapist is positioned on the right side of the screen, sitting on a chair at the same height as the member being treated. The member who is not receiving treatment moves to the left, right, or behind the chair in which the member being treated is sitting (Figure 1). In Video #3, the placement is broadly the same, but only the member receiving treatment and the therapist appear on the screen.

Figure1



Figure2



Source: Honkure's video #2 and #3

In *Honkure* and other YouTube channels, the person receiving a foot massage sits on a chair with their legs thrown out toward the practitioner. Therefore, this placement of the performers is not unusual in itself. However, when the camera is positioned in the direction of the feet of the person being massaged, as in the three videos, the person's body is filmed slightly from below. Therefore, if the person receiving treatment wears a skirt and stands on their knees or moves their lower body violently, their underwear may appear on the camera.

It is impossible to know whether the members of the cast were aware of this and had some intention to do so by only these videos. However, it should be noted that in the three subject videos, five out of a total of seven performers, in most cases, were wearing skirts. In Video #2 and #3, the members' underwear may have been visible as a result of the foot massage while wearing skirts, and stickers were attached in places (Figures 2).

At this point, new questions emerge. If underwear is to be made ultimately invisible, it would be more efficient to wear clothes that do not show underwear when shooting. Why do the members of *Honkure* wear skirts during shooting, and why do they “hide” their underwear from the viewers? What purpose do the stickers, which seem to have been deliberately employed, serve?

4. The *conventional meaning*: possibility of sexual interpretation and male viewers' identification with the male performer

In this section, the “foot massage” scene is examined with reference to earlier research on pornography, with a view to exploring the ways in which it may be interpreted as sexual.

First, the role of the stickers used by *Honkure*'s sex workers will be examined. In brief, the function of these is not only to “hide” the performers' underwear, or even more so, but also as a staging device to indicate that “their underwear/genital is there.” This can be explained by drawing on Han et al. (2020), whose study indicates that the sticker may elicit greater sexual arousal in viewers than the direct display of underwear itself. The study in question presented heterosexual young adult men and women with four categories of photographs of both male and female models (fully dressed pictures, naked pictures, covered pictures, and underwear-wearing pictures) and measured the participants' levels of sexual arousal. The results indicated that participants reported higher levels of sexual arousal when viewing covered pictures than when viewing photographs of naked models (Han et al. 2020: 5–6). Han and colleagues attribute this effect to the fact that covered pictures demand more active engagement of the

prefrontal cortex, as participants perceive the obscured genital image as if it were naked (ibid., 6).

Applied to *Honkure*'s videos, the sticker can therefore prompt viewers to imagine not only the performers' underwear but even their genitalia. It is self-evident that viewers cannot directly see the performers' underwear or genitalia. However, viewers are at least able to perceive that "the performer's underwear was captured by the camera" when the stickers appear on the screen. Furthermore, the fact that the stickers cover the performers' private parts enables viewers to not only assume the presence of undergarments but also to even project their own assumptions of genitalia onto the covered area. As a result, the sticker, which is supposed to play the role of "hiding" the underwear, can be said to actively stimulate sexual interest in the male viewers.

It is worth returning to the position of the therapist and the member of *Honkure*. In all three videos, the member being treated is seated in a chair with her face facing the camera, and the therapist is positioned to the right of the screen, with his back to the camera and rarely shows his face. The effects that can be read from this placement of the performers are the following two: capturing the central reaction of the member being treated and showing the therapist as a man with minimal personality.

The removal of the individuality of the male performers is a direction that is common to adult videos, a type of pornography. According to sociologist Keisuke Hattori, among male viewers of adult videos, there are many who desire to minimize the presence of male actors on screen, and probably in response to this demand, video production companies sometimes "remove the presence of male actors" by putting mosaics on their faces (Hattori 2024: 142). As a result, from the screen, "the rival who tries to steal 'my' (my annotation: male viewers of adult videos) woman disappears and becomes a container for 'my' spirit." (ibid.) In the foot massage videos by *Honkure*, the male therapist is represented as a person with less personality, which creates room for the male viewer to project himself onto this "container" figure.

The three videos from *Honkure* discussed above are sexually suggestive, and male viewers are likely to view them with an interest similar to one in pornography. However, the subject "foot massage" is not necessarily sexual. Why sex workers in *Honkure* represent themselves as sexual bodies for heterosexual men but keep them to the extent that they "can be interpreted as such"?

5. The *intrinsic meaning*: how the representation came into being and what does it consist of?

The social context referred to in this section for the purpose of iconology is a guideline on YouTube: Advertiser-friendly content guidelines. This is a set of terms and conditions for returning revenue to creators from advertisements placed in their videos. It lists "adult content" as one of several types of content that may earn limited or no advertisement revenue. If deemed as such, it could lead to a decrease in the number of views of the video and a suspension of advertising revenue payments to the creator. One of the categories of "adult content" here is "Sexually gratifying content," which includes items such as "descriptions of or implicit references to sexual activities" and "sex workers featured as an entity" (YouTube 2025).

While this guideline is not themselves a sexual norm, it is probably affected by the norm that excludes sexual topics from the public space, as a "sex free" (Vincent et al. 1997: 114).

Since public space was historically conceived as a domain for cis-heterosexual men, “sex” here is understood in strictly heterosexual terms, thereby excluding women, who are positioned primarily as sexual objects for heterosexual men. Of course, this does not mean that women do not appear in YouTube videos at all. Rather, what is regulated here is the female body as a sexual object. When the women in videos are deemed “sexual” or “sex workers,” they are forced to leave the platform.

Taking this background into account, the reason why sex workers in *Honkure* represent themselves as sexual bodies for heterosexual men, but keeping them to the extent that they “can be interpreted as such,” is to avoid exclusion by the guidelines. In doing so, they resist or circumvent the label of “deviance” and remain in the public space.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this discussion returns to the initial question: how do sex workers survive within an oppressive environment on social media? Based on the preceding discussion, two main points emerge. First, the sex workers from *Honkure* represented themselves as sexual bodies—despite discussing non-sexual subjects like “foot massage”—by strategically utilizing the positioning of the performers and on-screen stickers. Second, this non-explicit representation appears to be a strategy to circumvent YouTube’s guidelines; specifically, the platform's exclusion provisions against sex workers.

This brings us to the second question posed at the outset: What does it mean for sex workers to survive in such an oppressive environment? YouTube has laid down guidelines that exclude “sexual” content, presumably influenced by sexual norms. In reality, however, there are “sexual” contents and “sex workers.” The presence in place of what/who is not supposed to exist exposes the “sexual body” that the provision that excludes them believes is “*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler [1990]2006: 185). The self-representations of the sex workers in *Honkure* have the potential to subvert prevailing norms by exposing the performative basis of the sexual norms underlying their exclusion.

Currently, however, the exclusion of “sexual content” on YouTube is increasing. This is likely because many users engage in expressions interpretable as sexual, leading to additional regulations and, in turn, the creation of new expressions that operate like loopholes. One might say that the survival skills of sex workers have ironically resulted in a narrowing of their place in public.

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The Three Videos from *Honkure*

Video #2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMuttRhqvAE>

Video #3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q68tCxrSFoU>

Video #4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05kkPcTmiJ4>

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