

Nailed It: Producing and Consuming in Tokyo's Nail Industry

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Abstract

This study, supported by public observation, interviews, and analysis of Japanese fashion and nail magazines, looks at the role of the Tokyo nail industry in the shaping of Japanese women's bodies. I particularly investigate how, through the lens of the nail industry, issues surrounding class, race, and femininity are played out in Tokyo today. The visible gap between women who can afford, either economically or socially, to wear extreme forms of nail art publically marks women as culturally acceptable or socially transgressive.

Urban Divides

In Tokyo, Japan, women's proclivities for extreme fashion might be hidden at first to an untrained eye. Sitting demurely on crowded trains in sedate blouses and skirts, many Japanese women quietly carry in their purses the small items, like rhinestone-coated cell phones and bejeweled mirrors, which allow them to consume princess-inspired styles without publically drawing attention to themselves. Other young Tokyo women, however, brazenly display their commitment to fashion trends by marching down the street in six-inch platforms, fishnet leggings, and bra-baring tops. Crossing all fashion lines, acrylic nails, which in Tokyo are often two or three inches long with intricate designs and large jewels, cannot be hidden in public, and strict prohibitions against them exist in both schools and workplaces. Indeed, simply by wearing acrylic nails, especially ostentatious ones, women have the opportunity to negotiate their own social positions within a specific urban environment.

Tokyo, as a city, is premised upon internal divisions which physically reflect a highly diverse and complex society. The landscape includes sharp distinctions between the older *shitamachi*, or downtown areas, and the entertainment and fashion heavy *yamanote*, or foothill districts, of Shinjuku, Shibuya, Harajuku, and Ikebukuro. Any claims to Japanese homogeneity conceal the lives of large populations of migrant workers from Brazil and Peru, second- or third-generation Japanese-born Koreans, ethnically diverse Okinawan and Ainu populations, diverse rural and urban populations, and a vibrant working-class culture. These claims also ignore much of the innovation and creativity of the youth-driven fashion industry, which has exploded since the rapid economic success of Japan following World War II.

Over the last several decades, groups of young, urban girls have dressed in daring and controversial clothing as a form of adolescent experimentation. Such groups are called tribes because individual members do not strive to be entirely unique in their fashion sense, but instead band together into one specific look.¹ Unlike Western youth subcultures or countercultures, Tokyo street fashion is not used to make an ideological or political statement. Usually it is a much more

¹ See Patrick Macias and Izumi Evers, *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno: Tokyo Teen Fashion Subculture Handbook* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007). Tiffany Godoy, *Tokyo Street Style: Fashion in Harajuku*, ed. Ivan Vartanian, Keiko Hirayama, and Tetsuya Suzuki, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008); Dave McCaughan, "Street Cred in Harajuku." *Advertising Age* 77, no. 50 (December 11, 2006): 28; Tadashi Suzuki and Joel Best, "The Emergence of Trendsetters for Fashions and Fads: Kogaru in 1990s Japan," *The Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 1. (Winter 2003): 61-79.

personal mode of resistance to the strictures of Japanese life.² Each of these groups developed in a symbiotic relationship with different *yamanote* districts. For instance, the dance club culture in Shibuya inspired and sustained groups like the *yamanba* who, in the early 2000s, dominated the shopping-arcades of Shibuya with their brightly colored clothing, darkened skin, and bleached hair. In contrast, a mere hop away by train, vastly different tribes, like the Victorian-doll inspired Lolitas, developed out of the Harajuku's punk music venues. While both of these tribes defined their styles on carefully crafted notions of stylized and urbanized beauty, it was the louder and more brashly sexual groups like the *yamamba* and her more mainstream cousin, the *gyaru*, who helped to establish the nascent nails industry in Tokyo. Throughout the 2000s, however, they were rivaled in nail consumption by the pink-addicted *himekei*, or princess-style, and *onekei*, a more sedate "older-sister" style.

Tokyo, often seen as a giant playground for teenagers, draws in thousands of girls from the outlying metropolitan and suburban areas to participate in radical youth fashion. On any Saturday morning, riding into the city on a commuter line train, you can watch as young girls tease out their long pink tresses, layer on thick eye makeup, or roll along suitcases filled with frilly Lolita dresses, into which they will change in a McDonald's bathroom once they arrive in the city. This, at times long, commute is often obligatory for people working in the nail industry as well. Many of Tokyo's nail technicians, or nailists, travel from less fashionable but more affordable areas around the city to work in the *yamanote* districts.

While Japanese scholars have offered detailed analysis on the flourishing street-fashion industry, no work has yet touched on the rise of nail culture in Tokyo.³ Nails as a beauty regimen have seeped into every landscape in Tokyo, from the night-clubs and shopping centers to the Shinto shrines and wedding reception halls, redefining notions of beauty. Supported by evidence from public observation in Tokyo salons and shopping centers, informal interviews with both customers and nail artists, and analysis of nail art and fashion magazines from 1998 to 2011, I argue that nail fashion has created specific spaces in Tokyo, including salons, competitions, and the relationships between nailists and their customers, which draw together a range of women from different physical areas of the metropolis and from diverse socio-economic spheres. These women engage with the culture differently based on specific pressures created by various social institutions, including work and school, with nailists themselves sharing an interest in extreme and socially transgressive nails with other women who work in unstable, fashion-oriented careers.⁴ Women from more stable

² Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 27.

³ For a brilliant examination of New York's nail industry see Miliann Kang's *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

⁴ I would like to thank Kana Ozawa for all of her assistance during my stay in Tokyo, Japan. I would also like to thank all of the readers who generously provided comments on this essay. I primarily reviewed nail magazines, like *Nail Max*, and fashion magazines such as *egg* and *ageha*. These

economic positions, however, have also contributed greatly to the growth of the nail industry in Tokyo, despite persistent bans on acrylic nails, through the advent of “event nails” for weddings, coming of age ceremonies, and summer festivals. Nail culture in Tokyo demonstrates the ways in which Japanese women negotiate the metropolis, both physically and socially, by physically marking socio-economic differences, along with their fashion proclivities.

In this paper I will first discuss the landscape of Tokyo nail salons within the topography of both fashion styles and fashion hubs. I then investigate how the main consumer base, which range from well-off customers receiving luxurious, though often demure, manicures to less well-off women working in sectors of the body-focused service industry, usually participates in specific types of nail art based on the particular pressures of their lives, both social and institutional. Lastly, I will discuss the importance of “event nails” in allowing the nail industry access into even the most traditional aspects of Japanese culture. Through their participation in nail culture, women in Tokyo produce new physical spaces and social interactions rife with tensions concerning race, class, and fashion.

Situating Space: Salons in Tokyo

In 1989, an American-trained nailist named Sachiko Nakasone opened her NSJ Nail Academy in Tokyo. Despite the economic decline and stagnation of the early 1990s, the industry has grown steadily, with roughly 17,000 salons operating in Japan in 2010 and an estimated annual worth of 201.5 billion yen (2.4 billion dollars).⁵ Nail salons have been so successful in Japan, in part, because they have the ability to cross over lines concerning taste and income, with one nailist producing a wide array looks in a single day, from three-inch, pierced red nails to simple pink French-tipped nails. Certain types of nail salons beckon to certain kinds of customers, however, and through investigating the topography of salons throughout Tokyo, we can discern how salons reflect and reinforce the divisions of Tokyo, in which the *yamanote* areas are often centers for young, economically-unstable women to work or to shop but not usually to live. We can further see how Japanese women negotiate these divisions by creating a space within salons in which they simultaneously maintain the local character of their district while also transgressing barriers of fashion, age, and socio-economic class by drawing in customers from across the city.

magazines are available for purchase by the public, and *Nail Max* has a circulation of 150,000, though they are most widely read by professional nailists and can be found in almost every nail salon. See, “Nail Max,” *Japanese Streets*, February 15, 2011. *Nail Max* issues from 1998-2001 and 2006-2010 were available at the National Diet Library, with *Nail Up* issues filling in the gaps between 2001-2005. The name originally appeared in *katana* as, “ネイル max,” but has been changed to “Nail Max,” with the *katakana* appearing in smaller letters above. Conversely, *Nail Up* appears with large *katakana* print and smaller English.

⁵ Tomoko Otake, “Art at Your Fingertips,” *Japan Times Online*, January 30, 2011.

Nail salons in Tokyo follow a historical separation of the city into the older, downtown districts, and the current de-centralized hubs of business and entertainment. Tokyo's built environment rapidly changed after the devastating Kanto earthquake of 1923 and again after World War II. The *yamanote* districts, including Shinjuku, Shibuya, Harajuku, and Ikebukuro, grew disproportionately based largely on their access to suburbanite-fed National Railway lines.

On a single street in East Shinjuku, one can find an overabundance of different kinds of nail salons, from upscale spas to train station stalls.⁶ The many various salons in a single *yamanote* district contrasts drastically with the veritable desert of salons in the *shitamachi*, or downtown districts. Only Asakusa, a downtown district famous for its Sensō-ji Buddhist temple, is widely acknowledged as a hotspot for mom-and-pop shops selling discount nail products and is frequented by enthusiasts looking to score bulk rhinestones and cheaper paint. Thus, even though Asakusa is usually more valued for its "traditional" Japanese landscape, it helps to supplement and sustain this aspect of the *yamanote's* fashion industry. The dearth of salons in these neighborhoods also necessitates the flow of young women away from the lower city and the far-flung suburban areas and into the foothills of the *yamanote*, creating a multidirectional stream of beauty industry workers converging on Shibuya, Shinjuku, and Ikebukuro.⁷

In addition to the *shitamachi/yamanote* distinctions, each district has been given individualized flavors by its residents and visitors, with twin fashion centers of Harajuku and Shibuya standing on opposite ends of the fashion and nail spectrum. During the war period, Harajuku was the Yoyogi military drilling site for the Japanese army, and then became a main United States base during the occupation. Since the 1940s, Japanese youth have congregated in Harajuku in order to see the strange foreign fashions of the westerners, who were first occupiers and then visitors. Ultimately, Harajuku replaced Ginza, and prior to that Tsukiji, as the forum of the foreign in Tokyo.⁸ Today, its narrow Takeshita-dori is the home to numerous independent fashion boutiques which cater to the more subcultural fashions, especially the Victorian-styled Lolitas, though very few nail salons line its streets. Whereas Harajuku is more subcultural, trendy, and alternative, Shibuya represents vivacity and pulsing consumerism. Shibuya's nightclubs gave birth to the neon-clad, *para-para* dancing *yamanba*. The *yamanba's* smaller group of male followers even adopted the name "Center Guy," *sentā gai*, from a pun on Shibuya's main street, Center Gai, inextricably linking fashion identity to landscape.⁹ The colossal department store, 109

⁶Kang defines three types of salons, and corresponding body labors, existing in the city of New York. Pampering body labor, expressive body labor, and routinized body labor. Kang, *The Managed Hand*, 8.

⁷For more on the *shitamachi* see Theodore Bestor, *Neighborhood Tokyo*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁸For a history of these changes, see Roman A. Cybriwsky, *Tokyo: the Changing Profile of an Urban Giant* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1991).

⁹Philomena Keet and Yuri Manabe, *The Tokyo Look Book: Stylish to Spectacular, Goth to Gyarū, Sidewalk to Catwalk* (New York: Kodansha International, 2007), 12-13.

(*ichimarukyu*), stands sentinel over the masses of Tokyo teenagers clustered around its base, smoking and chatting. Within this department store, there are several nail salons offering rhinestone encrusted manicures. The *yamanote* areas in general have offered Japanese youth a place to gather, spend money, and experience the vigor of urban life, with fashion sensibilities often overlapping between the districts. Within the topography of fashion tribes, however, nail culture is more heavily identified with the Shibuya, Shinjuku, and Ginza areas, in which well over three hundred salons are promoted in free business magazines.¹⁰ Despite these localized characters, it is often the case that salons actually provide a space in which these otherwise segmented fashion forms meet through a shared interest in nail culture.

Within each area of the city, and their particular fashion constituencies, Tokyo nailists have constructed several different kinds of salons to serve different kinds of customers. These places act as new physical locations which bring women from a myriad of social situations and regions of the city into contact with each other even as they reiterate class hierarchies. Tokyo salons fall roughly into three levels, based mainly on the price and services provided. High-end salons cater mainly to upper middle-class women, offering sedate French-tips with understated rhinestones which cost around 1890 yen (\$23) per finger for gel extensions.¹¹ The décor of these salons tend to muted in color scheme, with low lighting, and a calming spa-like atmosphere. Customers are usually older, though not exclusively middle-aged, and well-coiffed. Employees, including nailists and receptionists, are also well-groomed, with professional tool belts and high-quality uniforms. In these salons, nailists are expected to speak constantly in honorific forms, a complicated task for any young Japanese person, though it is the customer's choice as to when or if to speak to her nailist, and employees must always display a sense of calm, self-effacing professionalism. Drinks, massage chairs, and TVs are often provided for the customer as the nailist sits off to one side, minimizing the requirements for social interaction. Nailists must receive high levels of both technical and etiquette training to work in these salons.

Mid-range salons emphasize creativity and affordability, costing around 1260 yen (\$15) per finger, and seem to be the most numerous and most frequented shops. These shops tend to be overtly prissy in décor, with a glut of pinks and whites, crystal chandeliers, and overstuffed chairs. Nailists are allowed to dress in more fashionable uniforms, such as jean-shorts and a white t-shirt with the store's logo or matching, well-fitting aprons. They are also permitted to drop into casual speech forms more readily with their customers, attempting to offer personalized service instead of a relaxing or spa-like experience. Even in these instances, however, an employee must be savvy enough to gauge her customer's personality and mood in order to know what type of speech

¹⁰ Such as *Couponland*, a free magazine available in train stations throughout Tokyo.

¹¹ All price quotes are taken from salon brochures procured directly from each salon during my research trip.

patterns to use. For instance, while visiting a pleasant but less expensive shop with a young Japanese friend, our nailist almost immediately dropped polite speech forms, chatting away as if we were close friends. My friend expressed her annoyance after the session, saying that it was rude to speak to us in such a way because we were paying customers, but admitted it was fine because the nailist was (slightly) older than both of us. This nailist/customer hierarchy was indirectly confirmed by a nailist who explained her job is “fun” because she “can listen” to various people (*kikeru*), thus placing herself in the role of the passive listener and not the equal conversant. A range of women between their late teens and mid-forties, patronize mid-range salons, including young women from the more extreme fashion tribes. The most regular customers, however, are usually women who adhere to more “normal” fashion groups, like older-sister *onekei* or the princess-obsessed *himekei*. These fashions value high-maintenance and elegance, and therefore embrace stylish nails that can take the form of three-inch, 3D-flower laden nails, or sedate French tips.¹² While still fairly expensive, these shops appeal to women who are personally and creatively invested in their nails.

Finally, discount nails are regularly available at small kiosk nail salons, typically just a counter found in train stations, shopping malls, comic book cafes, or drug stores. Nailists work quickly and mechanically in order to efficiently manage their time. They are often dressed in matching smocks with brightly emblazoned logos and use polite speech forms during the nominal conversation. As acrylic extensions and extensive artwork can take hours to accomplish, employees at these nail salons usually perform basic manicures instead. Often these kiosks are outlet branches for larger chains and offer women the chance to have their damaged nails removed quickly, instead of having to make a regular appointment. The interactions between women, especially customers and nailists, depend heavily on the type of salon. The mid-range salons offer the most casual and informal service, with the women at these salons tending to be closer in socio-economic backgrounds, careers, fashion investments, and even ages.

It is also notable that while there are most likely at least some Japanese-born Korean and Chinese women working as nailists, of the many migrant groups living in Japan, there are none that dominate beauty service industries.¹³ This is due to both systemic institutional barriers, such as the necessity to pass nail association exams in Japanese and visa restrictions, and also the negative

¹² See Philomena Keet’s *The Tokyo Look Book* for examples of many of these fashions.

¹³ Joshua Hotaka Roth discusses the difficulties of second- and third-generation Brazilian-born Japanese, or *nikkeijin*, in *Brokered Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Migrants in Japan* (U.S.A: Cornell University Press, 2002). Ayumi Takenaka also investigates social mobility for ethnic minorities and asserts the over ninety percent of Peruvian workers are manual laborers, with little opportunity for self-employment in “How Ethnic Minorities Experience Social Mobility in Japan,” in *Social Class in Contemporary Japan: Structures, Sorting and Strategies*, ed. Hiroshi Ishida and David H. Slater (New York: Routledge, 2010), 223-229. Nobue Suzuki looks at Filipina women’s lives in Japan, see her “Filipina Modern: ‘Bad’ Filipino Women in Japan,” *Bad Girls of Japan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

images carried by many Japanese people about migrant workers. Indeed, even regional differences between Japanese women should be suppressed in many salon situations. For nailists in Tokyo, distinct regional accents are often discouraged and proper, standardized mannerisms, language, and behavior are promoted, making for a homogenous ethnic and cultural space, even as it is a diverse socio-economic and fashion sphere.

As Tokyo's nail industry has developed in tandem with many fashion tribes, nail enthusiasts' have contributed to the physical landscape of the city with many types of salons in different sections of the cities. Tucked into comic-book cafes, situated in the hallways of shopping centers, and found in every other niche imaginable, nail salons in Tokyo can offer twenty-minute basic manicures or four-hour rhinestone extravaganzas, resulting in different types of interactions between women from a range of social positions. Nailists must work hard to serve their customers in the appropriate manner, including the way they dress and speak, in order to make a manicure both a beautiful product and an enjoyable experience. Salons, as urban spaces, bring women together across age, fashion, and economic lines, but also maintain a certain distance between nailists and their customers. The fact that nails salons have boomed in the *yamanote* sections, and in particular Shinjuku and Shibuya, reflects not only the entertainment-rich personality of these districts but further influences their fashion reputations and physical characteristics as more and more women arrive from the suburbs or *shitamachi* to both perform nail work and consume nail art.

Urban Instability and Extreme Nail Art

The cover of 1998's *Nail Max* read, in English, "Yes, we have maximum colors. So let's enjoy more cool nail art and have a fashionable life. Be HAPPIE!!" This slogan in many ways characterizes the mentality driving the success of the Tokyo's nail industry. In the last few decades, conspicuous consumption became a way of life for many young women caught up in Tokyo's ever expanding landscape of purchasable goods. New, more assertive, forms of femininity emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s with the dark-skinned and mini-skirted *gyaru*, *ganguro*, and *yamanba*. Centered around Shibuya, these girls used Tokyo as a giant dance club, playground, and bedroom, pushing street fashion to the extreme and transgressing the boundaries of acceptable gender behavior, including sleeping on the streets of Tokyo for days at a time. The louder and more garish forms of fashion were associated with the urban working classes, and when middle-class, suburban girls adopted these identities, moral panics concerning prostitution and materialism spread easily among Japanese parents. Magazines dedicated to the *yamanba* look, such as *egg*, often portrayed girls screaming, smiling, and laughing, despite the cultural etiquette of women rarely displaying their teeth.¹⁴ It is these assertive youths who are most readily

¹⁴ Miller, *Beauty Up*, 31.

associated with the nail boom in Japan as both producers and consumers. They, and their more conservative and prissily garbed counterparts, repopulated Tokyo with new fashion-centered identities, demonstrating how their own creative desires, social class, educational background, and career become written on their bodies through their fashion choices. Ultimately, women from unstable economic backgrounds are funneled into lower-paying and less dependable careers, often in a body-centered service industry, where they have more practical reasons to invest in extreme nails, along with expensive hairstyles, makeup, and clothing.

Over the twenty years of development, two distinct consumer groups of nails have emerged, with slightly different styles of nail art. These consumers represent the extremities of Japanese womanhood, the proper and deviant, and work to further the conceptions of “bad beauty” and “good beauty.”¹⁵ Interestingly, the key difference in appropriate and inappropriate nails in Japan is the length of nail extensions. Many women abide by the “two-thirds rule” (*sanbunoni*), meaning that tripling the length of the natural nail would look gaudy, and thus one is only supposed to double the length at most. As one magazine related, French-tips should only show two millimeters over the tip of one’s finger.¹⁶ The consumers who focus on consuming a socially acceptable form of nail art tend to prefer shorter nails, though still featuring rhinestones, 3D art, and glitter. These women are often from the more stable side of the middle class and tend to follow the more conservative and demure style of *onekei*. Many work for large companies as office ladies or in positions of sales representatives for large department stores. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Tokyo street fashion enthusiasts have embraced long, ornate nails as a part of their bad beauty regimens, and designing different nails for their own fashion taste, whether gothic, *gyaru*, or girly. This relationship between extreme nails and extreme fashion tribes is evidenced in the scarcity of long, bejeweled nails in mainstream fashion and nail magazines but the plethora of these nails in niche fashion magazines like *ageha*, which is dedicated to a bar hostess look of formal dresses, bouffant hair, and digitally enlarged eyes.¹⁷

Many Japanese women feel pressure to conform to demure nails because of a generalized social desire to be correctly attired at any given time. Concern over when and where certain styles should be worn is a cultural obsession, embodied in the notion of “TPO,” or time, place, and occasion. Always spoken and written in English, TPO-concerned magazine articles, books, and TV programs provide women with an authoritative source on social appropriateness. Nail magazines

¹⁵See Julie A. Willet, “Hands across the table’: A Short History of the Manicurist in the Twentieth Century.” *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 59-80. for a discussion on femininities and nail polish in America.

¹⁶“Nails Q & A,” *Nail Max*, 1998, 48-49.

¹⁷In fact, in a rough visual analysis of February 2011’s *ageha*, a little over fifty percent of models are wearing nails, and perhaps sixty percent of these are particularly ornate nails. This is just a rough estimate based on my own categorization of extreme nails, but there is a measurable difference with other, more demure, fashion magazines.

in particular promote the notion of socially appropriate nails, minutely detailing suitable nails based on age, hair style, makeup, favored accessories, high-heels, boots, and sandals. There are also various “scenes” from around the city, including the office, a date, shopping, and parties, which are sorted between different “types” of women, from “Pop Girl” to “Gorgeous Girl.”¹⁸ As many scholars have noted, Tokyo’s fashion tribes are premised upon sociability, not individuality. Many Japanese women, even those participating in extreme fashion tribes, are interested in creating socially savvy personas as women who wear the most “correct” *kimono*, makeup, hairstyle, or nails possible.

Administrators in Tokyo’s education system have further institutionalized social anxiety against extreme nails, or even simple nail polish. The notion of assuming an approved style instead of creating an entirely new look might occur, in part, because most Japanese women have primarily dressed in uniforms for much of their lives and feel insecure about their abilities in selecting their own outfits, leading to a dependence on the authoritative advice of popular magazines.¹⁹ Most Tokyo schools also outright prohibit nail polish, with a varying degree of enforcement. For instance, in 1996, a poster for a school festival was banned because the girl had dyed brown hair and bright blue nail polish.²⁰ The disapproval of nail polish continues into higher education as well, as one nursing student lamented to me that she was not able to get a set of nails for her coming-of-age ceremony due to her school’s rules against wearing nail polish during practicum classes.

Career path is also a key component for Tokyo women in choosing socially acceptable nails, or not getting nails regularly at all. For students just emerging into the job market from college, social pressure to look the part of an office worker is made explicit through websites, like *recruitsuit.net*, which instruct young urbanites on the very real rules of which belt to wear, bag to carry, and hair cut to sport. Black hair, black knee length skirts, and demure makeup mark a woman dedicated to obtaining a position at a large corporation, or even just a regional branch of that corporation. These appearance anxieties have only deepened with the continuing economic recession. Women working in both stable white-collar jobs, such as in banks, offices, and hospitals, and also in unstable service-industry jobs, like at fast food restaurants and drug stores, are often outright banned from having any sort of manicure, let alone garish nails.

Yet while schools and employers attempt to reinforce a “traditional” ideal of Japanese beauty, with white skin, black hair, and modest clothing, Tokyo’s popular media is constantly reiterating the importance of being a savvy, urbane,

¹⁸“Springtime Going Out Nail Styles (*harunoodekakeneirusutairu*),” *Nail Up*, 2003, 37-43; “Event Nails (*ibenntoneiru*),” *Nail Max*, June 2008, 49.

¹⁹ Keiko Tanaka, “Japanese Women’s Magazines: the Language of Aspiration,” in *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D.P. Martinez (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 122.

²⁰See Brian McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan* (New York: Berg, 2000).

and global consumer, breaking a woman's essence into what she buys, carries, and wears. For instance, a popular and reoccurring photo spread in nail magazines is the "Item and Nail Check," which documents the contents of nail enthusiasts' purses. In these photos, a woman is deconstructed into images of her Gucci wallet, Hello Kitty makeup bag, bejeweled cell phone, and hot-pink camera.²¹ These spreads are always marked with the location of the photographer, from specific districts of Tokyo to other cities across Japan like Osaka or Sapporo. Even as regional differences are emphasized, the items in the bags are generalized. The same colors and brands are featured repeatedly, with both expensive western goods and cheap, Japanese dollar-store buys highlighted and commented upon. The act of segmenting a woman into these single items results in the construction of an entire person through consumer goods, revealing that a person can no longer consist of just the body as the "self," but can instead only exist as the sum of the fragments of one's nails, hair, shoes, and the contents of a purse. The simultaneous pressures to be a docile student or employee, an appropriately dressed woman, and an avid consumer can, however, result in "bad" beauty trends, with certain jobs demanding an entirely different type of fashion persona.

For girls consuming "bad" nails, the preferred fashions are viable only because of Tokyo's links to the global marketplace. In contrast to the ethnic homogeneity found in nail salons, the fashions worn by teenage Tokyoites have an amazing array of cultural hybridity, particularly the tribes most readily associated with the early nail industry. Walking down a street in Shibuya, young girls and their male counterparts can be seen loitering on street corners, laughing in gaming arcades, and eating in fast food joints. These fashion-oriented youth could be wearing anything from fringed buckskin skirts to rap artists' t-shirts, and cheap Hello-Kitty sandals will be worn with Louis Vuitton handbags. Within the highly versatile gambit of Tokyo fashion, women buy clothing, wear makeup, and do their hair in styles influenced by Native-American, Southeast-Asian, South-Asian, and African-American motifs. In fact, the early nail industry in Japan was driven in part by African-American inspired tribes, like B-girls and Rastafarians.²² The most transgressive beauty ideals of the early 2000s, including *ganguro* which means "black face," mandated not only long, colorful nails and bright, revealing clothing, but also artificially darkened skin through tanning and makeup. Known for their drinking, smoking, and dancing, these girls were derided by the Japanese media as jungle apes, literally spat upon by strangers, and highly criticized for wanting to be "black." Many of the models in *Nail Max's* 1998 issue have cornrows and visible tribal-style tattoos, and several interviews are with Japanese R&B musicians. Nail art

²¹ "Deco Item and Nail Check," *Nail Max*, June 2008, 53-55; "Ikebukuro Snap!," *Nail Max*, June 2009, 40-43. It should be noted that the nail industry is linked closely with the "deco" or decoration boom of the last ten years, in which any flat surface, like cameras and cell phones, are covered in rhinestone patterns. Often nail salons display samples of their deco-art and will provide this service on any of your commodities for a fee.

²² See Sharon Kinsella "Black Faces, Witches, and Racism against Girls" in *Bad Girls of Japan*, ed. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 144.

lessons in magazines include “tribal” designs and often touch upon the “ethnic” aesthetic. The consumption of racially marked goods and services in nail salons, tanning booths, and clothing stores transgresses deeply held beauty ideals of demure behavior, white skin, and modest clothing, even as it reasserts foreign cultures to be consumable goods.²³

Extreme nails require significant investments of time and money, yet the women receiving the most extreme nails often work in the most unstable jobs. In the wealthy entertainment and financial districts of Tokyo, like Shinjuku and Shibuya, it is the young women who are there to work in the clothing stores, not shop, who sport the most extreme nails. It is often precisely because these women do not have stable futures that they are participating in nail culture. Women who work as hostesses and salesgirls, as well as nailists, are in constant need to sell themselves as their products. In the 1990s a massive boom occurred in what was dubbed, “charisma shop assistant.”²⁴ This concept described the way in which girls had begun buying exactly what the beautiful and trendy salesgirls were wearing. These jobs became incredibly hard to procure and came with a certain amount of prestige. In 1999, *Popteen* magazine asked 500 teens who their fashion role models were and the top answers were not celebrities but instead shop girls at Shibuya’s bulwark of youth fashion, the 109 (*ichi maru kyū*) department store, demonstrating the balance of the local with the global in Tokyo’s fashion industry.²⁵ *Gyaru* or *yamanba* girls who were photographed and featured in the street style magazines several times could become well known within Shibuya and use this recognition to get a job at 109. As saleswomen, they must present themselves as far more hip and stylish than their customer base, necessitating immense amounts of money spent on clothing, hair, and nails. They are placed in positions of double precariousness; they earn little money to begin with and then must spend this to remain in that shaky position.²⁶

As many studies have shown, schools throughout Tokyo have become alternatively holding tanks for the ranks of future manual laborers or preparation for elite college students.²⁷ The lower-end schools serve as

²³Images of African-Americans, Taiwanese, and Jamaicans display little to no complexity of the actual humanity of foreign people, and demonstrate many inherent racial assumptions. Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East: Performing, Dancehall, Roots Reggae, and Rastifari in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 27-28. Also see Ian Condry’s *Hip-hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). Kang, *The Managed Hand*, 100. Also, Kinsella “Black Faces,” 147; John Russell, “Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture,” in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, ed. John Whittier Treat (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 20.

²⁴Yuniya Kawamura, “Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion,” *Current Sociology* 54, no. 5 (2006): 798.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 791.

²⁶The concept of “precarity” in Japan was discussed by Anne Allison in “Sensing Precarity: Amamiya Karin’s Activism and Post-Feminism of ‘Life Pain’” given at the “A Genealogy of Radical Feminism” workshop, held at Harvard University on January 29, 2011.

²⁷Robert Stuart Yoder, *Youth Deviance in Japan: Class Reproduction of Non-conformity* (Melbourne: Trans-Pacific Press, 2004), 46- 47; Takehiko Kariya, “From Credential Society to

channels from working-class backgrounds to working-class futures, by teaching what Japanese economic scholar David Slater calls, “skills, aspirations and strategies that allow working-class youth to get by in the city,” while the higher-end schools are preparing their students for college exams.²⁸ It is usual for students at lower-ranked schools to take on part-time jobs in the service industry, including waiting tables, selling clothing, and hostessing. Synonymous with the recession is the term *freeter*, meaning a person who holds various temporary jobs instead of a permanent job, with over three million of these workers nationwide by the early 2000s.²⁹ Working-class women have especially been resigned to jobs with little pay, no benefits, and the possibility of unemployment at any moment.³⁰ The persistent idea that most Japanese women live out their lives as housewives is inconsistent with statistics showing that over sixty-percent of married women work in some capacity, though many in unstable part-time positions and for small businesses.³¹ Women who hail from working-class backgrounds are more likely to end up in lower ranked high-schools, attend low-end universities or not at all, and work in the body-centric service industry as salesgirls, hostesses, or beauty technicians, especially if they already had an interest in fashion.

This is particularly true of nailists, themselves some of the most avid consumers of nail art. There are an estimated 65,000 working nailists in Japan today, with a large majority working in urban centers like Tokyo.³² They often face long hours, low pay, and high emotional tolls. In Tokyo, nailists can work between ten and twelve hour shifts, in addition to the long commute into the city.³³ Several of the nailists I spoke with stated their benefits were non-existent and wages were low, or as one put it, “It is not an amount I could be content with” (*manzokudekiru mangakudewa, naidesu*). Furthermore, it is truly the nailist’s sole responsibility to care for the customer, physically, linguistically, and emotionally.³⁴ Often, manicuring can go beyond just being physically demanding and actually become potentially injurious, with nailists suffering from stiff

‘Learning Capital’ Society: A Rearticulation of Class Formation in Japanese Education and Society,” and David H. Slater “The ‘New Working Class’ of Urban Japan: Socialization and Contradiction from Middle School to the Labor Market,” in *Social Class in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Hioishi Ishida and David Slater (New York: Routledge, 2010), 101, 148.

²⁸ Slater, “The ‘New Working Class,’” 139.

²⁹ Kariya, “Learning Capital Society,” 91.

³⁰ Jan Bardsley and Hiroko Hirakawa, “Branded: Bad Girls Go Shopping,” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, ed. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 122.

³¹ Aya Ezawa, “Motherhood and Class: Gender, Class, and Reproductive Practices Among Japanese Single Mothers,” in *Social Class in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Hioishi Ishida and David Slater, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 201.

³² Otake, “Art at Your Fingertips.”

³³ While there are men who pursue this occupation, I will be primarily focusing on the women who do so. I will, therefore, use the pronoun “she” when referring to employees. I will be using the term “nailist,” as this is the preferred term in Japan.

³⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild studied emotionally demanding occupations, like flight attendants, in order to explain the concept of “emotional labor,” see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (U.S.A: University of California Press, 1983). Kang argues the beauty service industry combines emotional and physical labor into body labor. Kang, *The Managed Hand*, 20.

shoulders, sore backs, failing eyesight, and lung problems from the inhalation of nail dust. Fortunately, most Japanese nailists are able to wear facemasks, but they still work around chemicals ranging from acetone to formaldehyde.³⁵ During one manicure lasting four and a half hours, without a break, and involving over one hundred tiny rhinestones, I expressed sympathy for my nailist's hard work. She simply stated that she usually did three or four sessions a day, ranging from two to six hours each, and therefore, I needn't worry about her. The danger inherent in the Tokyo nail industry is especially worrisome when considering that many of these female employees are pregnant and have little options for maternity leave.³⁶ The physical strains experienced by nailists are not only a part of their everyday urban lifestyles, but can also have lasting health effects for themselves and their children.

Despite the fact that these jobs can be so potentially harrowing and harmful, crafting yourself into a Tokyo nailist is no easy feat. Because educational degrees are not required, nail salon work is a particularly good option for girls who could not attend high school or college. Yet, while a degree or license is not necessary for these employees by law, common practice dictates that employees pass industry exams. An interview with a "top manicurist" in *Nail Max's* 2001 edition epitomizes the Japanese nail industry's hiring practices. Wanting to find a job in fashion, the interviewee explained that she applied for a nail artist position. Although the position did not require prior experience (*mikeikenshaOK*), it required a test, which she failed. She reasoned that every industry has procedures for hiring and so decided to go to nail school, which was the only actual option for passing the exams.³⁷ Many of the women I spoke with reiterated that while there are no national tests, *kokkashiken*, one needs to pass either one of the nail associations' exams or a more encompassing beauty association exam. Currently, 335,000 people have taken the Japanese Nailist Association (*nihon neirisuto kyōkai*) nail technician certification exams, which sorts nailists into three hierarchical levels based on the knowledge of skin biology, chemistry, nail structure, practical application, and creativity.³⁸ The emphasis placed on classroom training and exams, Japan's so-called educational credential society (*gakureki-shakai*), remains visible as the nail industry operates in this self-regulating manner, at high costs to Tokyo nail artists.³⁹

These costs are especially noticeable as many women who take up work in the service industry do not have the money to pay for this schooling outright. Most nailists enroll in a nail school that lasts between six months and two years.

³⁵ There are many chemicals used in the U.S. which lead to carcinogenic, allergenic, and reproductive problems. Salon employees often have skin and lung problems, severe headaches, and high miscarriage rates. See Kang, *The Managed Hand*, 222-3.

³⁶ "Salon Work while Pregnant (*ninnshinnchūnoseronwāku*)," *Nail Max*, December 2006, 116-117.

³⁷ "Top Manicurist Interview," *Nail Max*, 2001, 52-53.

³⁸ Otake, "Art at Your Fingertips."

³⁹ For a discussion on *gakureki-shakai-ron*, see Takehiko Kariya's "From Credential Society to "Learning Capital" Society," in *Social Class in Contemporary Japan: Structures, Sorting and Strategies*, ed. Hiroshi Ishida and David H. Slater (New York: Routledge, 2010).

Usually an individual attends class two or three times a week while simultaneously working, either at a nail salon or at another temporary job, which often results in prolonging the time it requires to finish the degree and take the exams. These schools are quite expensive, with the JNA website listing the most basic professional level course, which includes 250 hours of instruction, at 798,000 yen (\$9,750).⁴⁰ Additionally, it is common for employees to buy their own airbrush machines, gel nail kits, and other professional tools in order to practice at home. The cost in time and money which is required of potential nailists is representative of the high overall demands placed on service industry workers in a highly competitive market like Tokyo. For nailists, their work is simultaneously highly personalized, involving close personal contact, and also disconnected as professional pressures render not only their works of art, but their everyday work to some degree invisible. Often already economically marginalized within the metropolis, nailists are disciplined by the professional culture of the Tokyo nail industry to actively efface themselves linguistically and emotionally in an attempt to maintain stable employment, while also producing and consuming highly-visible and ostentatious nail fashion.

It is ultimately girls whose jobs depend upon their bodies, including hostesses, salesgirls, and nailists, who receive socially transgressive nails, rejecting a physical image of docility, even as they perform invisibility professionally, in order to sell their services to other women. While a sales manager at the trendy Shinjuku Topshop revealed to me that she invested in hand-painted nail art in order to draw compliments from customers, another woman complained that she was forbidden to wear nail polish to work at a major Tokyo drug store because customers would complain. Thus, it is not the Tokyo service industry in general, but the parts of the service industry in which women depend on their hair, nails, and clothing to earn money. The producers of nail art often share this socio-economic sphere with women who participate in the most extreme forms of nail culture. In many ways, for urban Tokyoites, the most visible construction of class is through fashion.

The ways in which Tokyo has been shaped by nail fashion is deeply influenced by how and why women participate in the culture, which is based on the negotiation of mediated messages from schools, work, and social norms at large. As salons cater to specific types of women, different social institutions either push them towards or away from various types of nails, ultimately marking women's bodies with their social position. The desire for perfectly manicured nails and the inability to achieve this perfection was reiterated continuously in my conversations with Japanese women. Several women I spoke to, among which were a graduate student, a bank teller, a convenience store worker, and a receptionist, simply could not afford regular trips to a nail salon or were explicitly prohibited by the companies from even painting their nails. Essentially, this is a category of women who are too poor to participate in the

⁴⁰ See <http://www.nailcraft.co.jp/guide.html> for a more thorough list of available courses and their prices.

leisured consumption of nails and too well employed to participate in transgressive forms of nail art. As Japanese schools and jobs ban the wearing of nails, especially ornate nails, the consumer population becomes split between women from lower socio-economic backgrounds who need to wear them for their beauty-oriented service jobs, those who enjoy it as a part of their fashion-tribe personae, and those who earn enough money and have enough leisure time to work within the “appropriate” lengths and motifs. The pressure by schools and jobs to properly condition the Japanese body co-exists with the nail industry’s value of feminine creativity, creating a space fraught with contradictions that women must personally negotiate daily. Women often indulge their desire for nails and bypass the usual prohibition of them by only participating in nail culture for special events.

Coping in the Middle: Event Nails

One way in which women caught in the middle of the extremes can play out their desires for well-manicured hands is through the creation of event nails, such as for weddings, festivals, and coming-of-age ceremonies. These event nails are often the only types of nails which solidly middle-class women will ever have done. While society at large still looks askance at more extreme forms of nail art, event nails are widely accepted as a part of a woman’s normal costume. The incorporation of nail art into not only street fashion but also into traditional ceremonies and costumes shows the ways in which fashion, including something so small and ephemeral as fingernails, can reshape both the modern and the ancient environments of a city, bringing nail art into the *kimono* shop, the Shinto shrine, and the wedding hall.

Bridal nails have an increasingly large niche market within the nail culture of mainstream Japan. Brochures from every type of salon included “bridal courses” (*uideingu kōsu* or *buraidaru kōsu*), ranging in price from over two-hundred dollars down to sixty dollars. Almost every issue of *Nail Max* included a section on bridal nails, from professional photo spreads of celebrities in wedding gowns and matching nails to submissions from readers and nailists of their own bridal nails. Titles like “The Princess Bridal of Your Dreams” and “Happy Nails to Match Your Wedding” appear periodically, and make a valiant attempt to integrate nails into the canon of necessary wedding beauty products.⁴¹ Many of the women I interviewed responded that they not only want manicures for their own weddings but often receive manicures before attending a friend’s wedding as well.

Since the postwar era, Japanese weddings have been increasingly more Western in style, including brides wearing rented wedding dresses during the reception

⁴¹ See: <http://wedding.gnavi.co.jp/category/beauty/beauty04/> for examples of current bridal nails. “Happy Nails to Match your Wedding (*happineirudeuedeinngumāchi*)” *Nail Max*, 1999; “Princess Bridal of Your Dreams (*okogareno ohimesama buraidaru*),” *Nail Max*, August 2009, 14.

and the couple cutting a wedding cake together. Weddings can still be very traditional, however, with brides wearing white *kimono* during the ceremony, which is often conducted at a Shinto shrine.⁴² It is therefore interesting that nails, often deemed inappropriate for formal occasions, should have become included in the day's beauty regimen. Yet, as nails are considered to be hyper-feminine, they highlight a bride's position as the ultimate feminine subject—the princess often advertised in the romantic and dreamy representations of weddings—that is invested in finding a dependable man. These images dovetail perfectly with the nail industry's emphasis on pampering women with delicate and ephemeral artwork that drips from their hands. Nails for weddings can be seen as articulating the wide gap in the constructed images of the feminine and beautiful "bride" in contrast to that of the hardworking and nurturing Japanese "wife."

Similarly, the New Year season provides a time for women to wear *kimono* to shrines and other gatherings. The cover of the February 2011 issue of *Popteen* magazine features three teenage girls in *kimono* with the caption *akeome!* (short for *aketeomedetōgozaimasu* or Happy New Year!). These girls are clutching stuffed bunnies, 2011's zodiac animal, smiling widely and making peace signs between long red, white, and pink nails. *Nail Max* also regularly runs February issues, which are released in late December or early January, with *kimono* features. In one, "*haregi&neiru*," meaning "holiday attire and nails," models pose in their elaborate *kimono* and accessories with nails that draw on more traditional motifs like chrysanthemums and cherry blossoms. Expressions like "more ardently than vermillion red" (*shunoakayorijyōnetsutekini*) are used as captions in order to evoke more traditional notions of "Japanese" beauty.⁴³ These articles give advice on how to achieve pretty or cute nails that lack in any overly "sweet" aspects, as well as how to properly put on a *kimono* and tie an *obi* sash.⁴⁴

This honing of one's talent in the mixing of traditional colors and motifs finds a culturally endorsed outlet in the celebration of a woman's twentieth birthday, called *seijinshiki*. *Seijinshiki* refers to the public celebration held on the second Monday of every January for all Japanese citizens who have or will turn twenty between April 1 of the previous year and March 31 of the current year. Many people travel to Tokyo to visit famous shrines and enjoy the holiday. *Hatachi* is the word for "twenty years old" in Japanese and connotes the entrance of a woman into adult society. Men also celebrate their *hatachi* birthday, but today men usually wear Western-style suits instead of traditional garb and are thus often not pictured in the popular imagery of *seijinshiki*. Young women, however, are given their *hatachi kimono* by their parents, a robe that can cost tens of thousands of dollars, while others receive *kimono* that their cousins or sisters wore. This *kimono* is usually *furisode*, which include the long sleeves that mark

⁴²Hugo Munsterberg, *The Japanese Kimono* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64.

⁴³"Holiday Attire and Nails (*Haregi&neiru*)," *Nail Max*, February 2009, 20-29.

⁴⁴"Japanese-style Nails (*Wasōneiru*)," *Nail Max*, February 2011, 14-23.

an unmarried woman, and participants also relish their elaborately tied *obi* sashes, dangling hair ornaments, white fur wraps, and small matching purses. Formal portraits are often taken of a woman in her full *hatachi* regalia, complete with professional hair styling and makeup. One Japanese woman told me that the only set of nails she had ever received was her *seijinshiki* nails, which were pink with white snowflakes to match the color of her *kimono* and the New Year season. The *seijinshiki* nail market is highly developed in Tokyo. The weekend of this celebration sees almost every Tokyo salon not only advertising specials for the event, but was also selling packets of handcrafted nail sets in a variety of “Japanese-style” colors and motifs. Internet auction sites also sell these packets and Mixi, a social networking site, comes alive at this time of year with photographs and stories of women’s *seijinshiki* nails.⁴⁵

The nail industry, particularly nail associations and schools, have expended a great deal of effort to promote event nails as essential aspects to any traditional costume. An NSJ Nail Academy how-to manual for consumers, *Kimono Nails (kimono no neiru)*, published in 2006, provides in-depth discussion on matching any formal occasion with a set of “Japanese-style” nails. The front cover reads “From the four season motifs to TPO [time, place, occasion] based art.” The book is split into roughly four sections, based on seasons and then broken down into subsections based on seasonal events. Interestingly, this is not just a book of etiquette concerning nails, but *kimono* as well. The back of the book contains extensive lessons on the appropriateness of different fabrics, colors and patterns, and sleeve-lengths for various events.⁴⁶

Through this type of work, the nail industry, a very well established nail academy in this case, works to educate the population on the “correct” way to both wear *kimono* and wear nails with *kimono*. Thereby bringing discipline to an art form/commodity that did not even exist within Japan thirty years ago. This moment is a culmination of invention, appropriation, adaptation, and perpetuation of “traditional” body norms in mainstream Japanese society.⁴⁷ In this way we can understand how women in Japan have adapted from America the playfulness and artfulness of acrylic nails, while also reworking their meanings within a specific context centered in urban Tokyo. Incorporation of nails into important life events acts to attract more consumers, as well as to turn nails into an acceptable and desirable practice.

⁴⁵ For some examples of *seijinshiki* nails, please see: <http://sweetie-nail.jp/gallery/2011/01/03-132058.php>

⁴⁶ NSJ Nail Academy (*neiruakademi*), *Kimono no neiru* (Japan: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2006).

⁴⁷ Ian Condry further discusses the stereotype of Japan as a “borrowing culture,” stating that it “can more accurately be described as fraught processes of learning, adaptation, and transformation, processes that unfold unevenly because they are always caught up in shifting relations of inequality.” Condry, *Hip-hop Japan*, 52.

Conclusion: Nailing It

Tokyo's nail industry is continuing to grow domestically and is becoming known internationally for its creative and talented nailists as it exports new techniques and styles. The sheer extremities of nail art in Japan, with its hot pink glitter, 3D panda bears, and hand-painted leopard patterns, make this form of fashion incredibly unique and interesting. After twenty years of development, nail salons are now a part of the normal Tokyo landscape, catering to women in both miniskirts and *kimono*, for everyday wear and special occasions.

Within the topography of Tokyo's fashion tribes, nails traverse the otherwise segmented groups of young women, drawing in women of older ages and higher socio-economic statuses as well. Nail salons can create a crossroad for Tokyoites hailing from various regions of the metropolis and from a range of social situations, helping them to negotiate daily pressures of work and school as they wear nails most suited to their lifestyles. The main consumers of extreme nails are actually encouraged by their jobs as hostesses, saleswomen, or even nailists into purchasing expensive and time-consuming nails as an investment in their bodies and, hopefully, an attraction for paying customers. Many of these women come from working-class backgrounds and from the fashion tribes associated with assertive forms of femininity, which help to funnel them into physically and emotionally demanding, financially unstable, beauty-oriented careers. Tokyo's education system, employment patterns, and media imagery has helped produce a service sector which is highly gendered and economically unstable, and which often both allows and demands employees receive extreme manicures. Most women, however, must limit their nail consumption, splurging for a pair of nails for their wedding, their *seijinshiki*, or a festival, bringing nail art into traditional Tokyo along with trendy Tokyo. Women who participate in nail fashion interact with the metropolis, both physically and through its social institutions, producing both complex female subjectivities and new social spaces.

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