

## Research Note

# Ririchan the “Grantee Gal”: Post-Feminism, Social Media, and the Celebri-fication of a Female Fraudster in Neoliberal Japan

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### Abstract

This research note explores an iconic female fraudster, who achieved celebrity criminal status with a substantial fanbase, by analyzing her status as an empowering female figure and the sociocultural context in contemporary Japan. In due course, we attempt to fill the notable research gap regarding the phenomenon of a female fraudster becoming a “celebrity criminal” from a post-feminist perspective. By analyzing online and interview materials, this article demonstrates that the highlighted otherness in Young’s “transgressive other” (Young 2007, 2011) is hardly applicable. We shed light on instrumentalized femininity shared among young women challenging the pre-existing normative femininity in contemporary Japan.

**Keywords:** Celebrity Criminal; Post-Feminism; Neoliberalism; Ririchan; Kawaii

### Introduction

Fraud has become an increasing concern in many parts of the world (Interpol 2024). According to the National Police Agency (2025), Japan is no exception: Both the number of reported cases of fraud and the amount of incurred financial losses reached their highest levels in 2024. While several studies have examined the culture and media that facilitate an environment in which fraudulent behaviors are justified and inflicted harms are downplayed (see Karstedt and Farrall 2006; Lazarus 2018; Levi 2006; Sohoni and Rorie, 2021; Tudor 2019), the phenomenon whereby some fraudsters have become cultural icons or “celebrity criminals” (Rojek 2001) has yet to be comprehensively investigated. This research note introduces our preliminary study on “Ririchan the Grantee Gal” (*Itadaki Joshi Ririchan*) (henceforth “Ririchan”), a female fraudster in Japan who has attained a twisted celebrity status comparable to that of lifestyle gurus (Baker and Rojek 2020), thereby addressing this research gap by asking the following question: Is Ririchan an “empowering” female figure? Owing, in part, to her and her supporters’ adept use of social media platforms, her pre-arrest activities led to the emergence of what we term *the Ririchan phenomenon*, which aligns well with the post-feminist spirit.

While the small number of existing studies of celebrity fraudsters highlight the role of the masculine norm (e.g., Casciano 2024), the present paper will elucidate how femininity was mobilized to establish Ririchan’s stardom against a backdrop of gender inequality and gender-related cultural norms, such as the stylized *kawaii* (Dale 2020: 326–327; Kinsella 2013; Iseri 2015; Lieber-Milo 2022)—roughly translated as “cute” in English—and the appraisals of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. Our preliminary findings suggest that the loneliness and isolation that young women experienced during the pandemic accelerated the process by which Ririchan became celebri-fied. Contrary to Young’s (2011) argument that consumer culture infiltrates marginalized communities, this research note posits that deviance is becoming normalized. It connects this trend to heightened loneliness and isolation within our contemporary culture, which is driven by both a culture of superfluous sociality propelled by online communication and a sense of existential uncertainty (Doi 2014). On the basis of primary data retrieved from Ririchan’s social media accounts and posts, autobiographical essays, and media reports, as well as interviews with Ririchan’s supporters and fans, and their publications, the present study’s preliminary findings suggest that Ririchan’s celebri-fication cannot be explained simply with reference to Jock Young’s (2007, 2011) model of moral panic, where he argues that it is caused by dramatic othering of the transgressor. Rather, we contend that Ririchan symbolizes lives of contemporary Japanese women, torn between neoliberalist entrepreneurial imperative to be independent

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and being incarcerated in the position of second-class citizens in the gender hierarchy. Ririchan embodies a complex multi-layered “contradictive femininity” that is representative of normative femininity in contemporary Japan (Hansen 2015). Ririchan owes her celebrity status to her masterful navigation of a contradiction. She both capitalizes on “kawaii femininity”—a style that is outwardly sweet and childlike—and strategically adopts a submissive stance. This approach aligns with Japan’s gender hierarchy, preserving male dignity and ensuring she has their support. She strategically inhabited a compellingly dependent role, soliciting care and nurture from men to reinforce their status and allow them to take pride in their actively superior position. Ririchan’s game plan echoes what Dale calls “an irresistible instinct to nurture” (2023: 24), which posits the manipulation of fundamental human reactions.

In addition to contributing to broader interdisciplinary debates within Japanese studies, we intend to contribute to post-feminism scholarship and studies of celebrity criminals by suggesting that the threshold of transgressions and deviance has been lowered amid Japan’s neoliberal transformative climate, whose forces threaten the composite of socioeconomic status and moral values that have long been the cornerstone of middle-class features (cf. Young 2007, 2011).

### Ririchan the grantee gal

In 2023, Watanabe Mai—a.k.a. “Ririchan the Grantee Gal (Itadaki Joshi Ririchan)” —who was aged 25 years at the time of her arrest in August of that same year, made headlines for having sold a self-created online manual with detailed instructions as to how to receive “donations” (*itadaki*) from middle-aged men, whom she referred to as *oji* (a contemptuous abbreviation of *ojisan* [a middle-aged man]) (Shūkan Bunshun 2023). The manual targeted like-minded aspiring so-called grantee gals, and Ririchan testified that she had earned 20 million yen (approximately US \$135,000) from its sales along with the “consultation service” that she provided to young women involved in *itadaki* activities, while also making 300 million yen (approximately US \$2 million) from her own activities in this realm (Friday 2023). Although the court ruling of 8.5 years of imprisonment was quite severe, she received support from journalists and writers, some of whom had known her before her arrest (Pinzuba News 2024). With their assistance, she launched an X (Twitter) account entitled “Ririchan is in prison,” on which she shared her reflections on her difficult upbringing, her experiences as a sex worker, and her time in prison. As of September 29, 2024, her account boasted nearly 300,000 followers. She began publishing her serialized autobiography, accessible for a fee, on an online blogging platform, *note.com*, in September 2024. Ririchan’s supporters have organized a public talk show, “Gathering to Discuss Ririchan” (May and October 2024), and an art exhibition entitled “Good Daughters—Love and Fraud” (July 2024).

### When fraudsters become stars

Extensive discourse has surrounded the relationship between sociocultural context and fraud across various demographic

groups. Several studies examining fraud have pointed to the influence of prevailing mentalities in contemporary society, such as self-reliant, individualistic neoliberal capitalism (Tudor 2019), or of constant insecurities in the market and legal cynicism (Kartedts and Farrall 2006). Other studies have examined the subcultures of both marginalized individuals (Phillips 2019; Lazarus 2018) and those considered powerful (Sohoni and Rorie, 2021).

Levi (2006) noted the media’s dual role as a watchdog of wrongdoing and a shaper of cultural norms; however, the media often prioritizes entertainment over information, in a trend known as “infotainment.” Levi dismissed the widely held belief that the powerful can evade the consequences of financial crimes by wielding political and financial influence over the media. He argued, rather, in favor of that which Rothe and Kauzlarich (2022: 26) term the “Hollywoodization of crimes of the powerful”—a phenomenon in which financial crimes are framed as dramatic narratives within the lives of celebrities.

A seemingly natural yet hitherto underexplored consequence within the field of financial crime is the phenomenon of the “celebrity criminal,” which refers to delinquent individuals who have attained extraordinary visibility through media mediation (Steenberg 2017). According to Rojek (2001), celebrity and transgression are inherently intertwined, as celebrity’s allure lies in the potential to diverge from one’s authentic self that it offers. While serial killers are often a favorite topic among audiences of popular culture, other criminals, including fraudsters (e.g., Frank Abagnale Jr.), also attract significant attention. Scholars working in celebrity studies and cultural criminology have examined the interplay between celebrity culture and the sharpened focus on certain criminals (Rojek 2001), the classification of high-profile criminals (Steenberg 2017), the mechanisms that underlie societal adulation of criminals (Penfold-Mounce 2009), and the gendered construction of celebrity criminals (Simkin 2013).

Despite this interest, few studies have attempted to investigate why certain fraudsters and other financial criminals captivate public fascination, along with the social and cultural conditions that contribute to their popularity. One notable exception is Casciano’s (2024) study of Hushpuppi, a Nigerian “Yahoo Boy” known for sharing his lavish lifestyle on Instagram. The study reveals that the sustained support that Hushpuppi received following his arrest was partly owing to his alignment of his self-representation with “hustle ideology,” which evidences a survival-of-the-fittest mentality among Nigerian youth today as they confront increased job insecurity in a neoliberal society. Similarly, the present study emphasizes the importance of identifying broader cultural norms, such as gender norms (Lazarus 2018), which celebrity financial criminals internalize but opportunistically perform to justify their exploitation of potential victims. Moreover, Casciano’s (2024) case study highlights the need to investigate the role that new social media platforms play, particularly their potential to facilitate bidirectional communication between celebrity criminals and their supporters, independent of traditional media mediation, as Levi illustrated (2006).

### Certainly, she wants to save “girls”

As one of the leading supporters of Ririchan’s community and chief editor of *Gekkan Itadaki Joshi* (*The Grantee Gals Monthly*) pointed out, the degree of a sense of solidarity among aspiring grantee gals’ pre-arrest online community was considerable and comparable to the notion of sisterhood (Sasaki and Masuda 2024: 8). Ririchan’s identification as a “savior” and her wish to “provide genuine help to girls in a similar situation as hers” (Sasaki and Masuda 2024: 8) are equally evident in Ririchan’s pre-arrest posts on social media, where she led an online community under the title “Ririchan is Homeless” (*Ririchan wa hōmuresudesu*) (a.k.a. Ririho). Ririho was filled with Ririchan’s posts about her everyday life, including her thoughts and photographs. It served as a discursive space for like-minded girls, and her self-representation in the roles of *kami* (“God”) and *mahō shōjo* (“magical girl”) was co-constructed by the community’s fans and followers. For example, the “bio” in the X (formerly known as Twitter) account of Ririho states, “Right, I will save all my followers” (Ririho, n.d.). After retweeting a follower’s post, which stresses how Ririchan’s words have saved her, Ririchan wrote, “God, I am the God,” suggesting her explicit willingness to undertake the role of a savior (Ririho 2023a). Ririchan’s savior identity is partially substantiated by her provision of tips for those who share a similar lifestyle, such as working in the sex industry (e.g., Ririho 2023b, 2023c). After her arrest, her supporters often commented on Ririchan’s witty wordplay, humor, and attentiveness toward her fellow grantee gals, which contributed to the account’s popularity. Girls exchanged information and supportive comments as a means of mutual care wherein issues of loneliness, victimization through sexual violence, exploitation, fragility, and forgiveness were ubiquitously addressed, alongside topics such as how to survive in the sex industry, consumer finance, self-harm, drug overdoses, (dedication to) hosts through self-sacrificial prostitution that provided an income stream for hosts, and cosmetic surgery. Another notable theme was that of *kimoi oji* (“disgusting” or “gross” middle-aged men) (Watanabe 2023), which functions as a medium through which the girls’ sisterhood was consolidated (Sasaki and Masuda 2024: 8). Interestingly, their sisterhood could also be destroyed by personal disagreement when sharing their personal experiences on relationships owing to their differing opinions (Sasaki and Masuda 2024: 8).

The increased attention paid to Ririchan may have stemmed from the fact that she symbolizes two interlinked social pathologies that have recently emerged in Japan. One is a scheme involving “host clubs”—establishments such as cabaret clubs in which male hosts, often dressed in flamboyant attire, entertain female customers by sitting beside patrons (see Takeyama 2016). This developed into a substantial social problem as young women’s engagement with (street-based) prostitution became widely reported as a consequence of their involvement with the clubs. This was a particular issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accentuated feelings of isolation, a lack of safe spaces in home environments, and loneliness, causing young women without financial means, including Ririchan, to become

increasingly attracted to these establishments (*Asahi* 2024). Host clubs frequently employ deceptive pricing practices with open bills, including excessive markups and hidden charges with the intention of causing customers to accumulate substantial debts from food and drink consumption. The gamified scheme, which involves female customers competing for attention from a specific host, compels female customers to spend extravagantly, driven by the anticipation that the biggest spender will win his heart. This leads to the next growing concern of so-called *tachimbo* girls, who are either willingly or forcibly engaged in prostitution, soliciting male customers on the street in a bid to repay the massive debts they have incurred while frequenting host clubs. Ririchan’s story may also be regarded as part of a broader problem relating to intimacy and crime. Given the lack of state efforts invested in the protection of young people (Iwata 2010), Ririchan’s case may exemplify the challenges faced by vulnerable youth who, lacking adequate parental support and social resources, find themselves drawn to the streets of Tokyo’s entertainment district (*Asahi* 2025), as both consumers and providers.

Meanwhile, Ririchan’s burgeoning support is further fueled by feminists who are outraged by men’s pervasive sexual exploitation of women, with or without direct involvement in the “host industry.” As the leading figure among Ririchan’s supporters revealed, Tokyo’s entertainment district, Kabukicho —“a home to one of the world’s largest and most diversified markets for heteronormative sex” (Koch 2020: 3)—where grantee gals spend time, is “a stage set in which one can perform her personal story” with a host in a staged romantic relationship (cf. Takeyama 2016) and is a “world of binary opposition made apparent.” The gendered nature of the relationship between Ririchan and her supporters, rooted in Japan’s cultural context, underscores the importance of examining how embodied gender inequality influences audiences’ perceptions of media representations of Ririchan’s case. While male consumption of commercial sex is widely accepted as part of social life, women’s participation in sex work is highly frowned upon by society (Koch 2020: 3). And although Ririchan’s background as a sex worker may have garnered her sympathy from some feminists, her readiness to engage in a systematic fraudulent operation and her self-identification as a “grantee gal” suggests a more complex interplay between her victimhood and her strategic exploitation of traditional gender hierarchies. In using *kawaii* to align herself with the Confucian ideal of the dependent woman and with post-feminist power<sup>1</sup>, she may have gained financial advantages while simultaneously achieving self-empowerment by challenging societal expectations. In this sense, Ririchan’s cases of a host craze (*hosugurui*)—a term coined to describe self-destructive enthusiasm for hosts—and fishing for funds from *oji* to feed her desire is a manifestation of what Hines postulates as “the need to ‘do’ gender correctly in relation to society’s expectations of what is appropriate gendered behaviour

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that recent studies have identified a more flexible use of the term, which do not necessarily reflect the Confucian value, as can be seen in *kimokawaii* (creepy-kawaii) and *gurokawaii* (grotesque-kawaii) (Dale 2020: 329).

[that] weighs heavily in all activities” (2018: 68), while exercising her own entrepreneurial initiatives and creativity.

### Rationalizing *itadaki* through the use of *kawaii* as a post-feminist power

Influenced by a consumer culture that underlines post-feminist ideologies of individual agency, empowerment, and self-determination (McRobbie 2007), the self-representation of Ririchan and her supporters—in both the physical and behavioral senses—is symbolic of the stylized *kawaii* in contemporary Japan. Against the backdrop of Japan’s gender and age hierarchy, *kawaii* is instrumentalized, performed, and visualized as inherently quirky, immature, and infantile (Iseri 2015: 159). The contemporary styles of *kawaii* in neoliberal Japan are “deviant from—or resistant against—ideal femininity in Japanese society” and are radically different from hyperfemininity (Iseri 2015: 142), which strongly aligns with Japan’s soft-power promotion (Iseri 2015: 149). Ririchan’s self-representation is a mixture of “a performance of exaggerated girlish femininity” (Monden 2015: 85) often referred to as *burikko* (Miller 2004) and those “segregated from obvious sexualization” (Monden 2015: 85). According to *Ririchan the Grantee Gal’s Manual*, such self-representation of *kawaii*-ness is instrumentalized to trick men into trusting girls and compelling them to help girls who might find themselves in “financial troubles” (Watanabe 2022). The Manual’s recommended components of “the-kind-of-girl-they-can’t-stop-but-help” (Watanabe 2022) persona include:

#### Backstories

- On bad terms with her family (with experiences of domestic violence)
- Both parents enjoyed infidelities
- Started to live by herself at the age of 18 because she hated home

#### Characters

- Traumatized by men
- Pursuing some dream, such as becoming a fashion designer
- Not good at depending on others
- Not good at making friends
- Easily deceived

#### Appearance

- Dark-haired
- Not showing off-brand products

#### Behaviors

- Always smiley
- Nodding (to show agreement or being persuaded)
- Listening to men’s stories with enthusiasm (Watanabe 2022)

The fetishized aesthetic associated with *kawaii* with respect to women’s physical appearance is also evident in *The Grantee Gals Monthly* (2024a, 2024b) and Ririchan’s YouTube videos, which evoke a Lolita-esque fashion aesthetic foregrounded with Orientalized *naïveté* that is accompanied by a distinctive makeup style characterized by disproportionately large eyes, faux-eyelashes, and a quirky voice (cf. Iseri 2015). While the concepts of playfulness and fun are also associated with “whimsical cuteness” (Nenkov and Scott 2014), May challenges the more widespread approaches to cuteness by illuminating its darker and pervasive aspect, which is a powerful source of intimacy that captures attention and is intended to elicit a specific response from the observer (May 2019; cf. Dale 2023). The underhand trickery that is at play in Ririchan’s fraudulent schemes foregrounds the perceived weakness and vulnerability associated with the manifestation of *kawaii*-ness. Rather than actively participating in fraudulent activities, Ririchan has cleverly portrayed herself as a *kawaii* passive recipient of a “donation”—a substantial sum of funds. Reflecting on Japan’s *kawaii* consumption, Liber-Milo argues that cuteness “uses its ‘weakness’ as a strength to survive and ‘entrap’ potential consumers to buy its cute products” (Lieber-Milo 2022: 748; see also Botz-Bornstein 2016: 112).

Post-feminists, as vigorous participants in consumer culture, appear to understand the *métier* of self-commodification (Iseri 2015). Meanwhile, Ririchan’s entrepreneurial endeavors, particularly her meticulously crafted manual intended to help her readers to successfully receive “donations,” appear to echo the neoliberal values of self-reliance and competitiveness that are prevalent in contemporary Japanese society. Ririchan’s use of the *kawaii* demeanor whether to elicit support or provoke some aggressive reactions is reminiscent of the strategy of Igarashi Mai, a.k.a. Rokudenashiko, an artist who was arrested for sharing data to print the shape of her vulva, the main object of her artistic activities, to the funders of her project (McKnight 2017). This suggests that a deeper analysis of the gender interplay in the specific cultural context is vital in understanding the process (cf. Penhold-Mounce 2009; Young 2011) by which the female fraudster becomes celebrated.

### Discussion and conclusions—Anticipating the folk devil becoming a reality

This essay has outlined the Ririchan phenomenon, framing it as a product of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, the post-feminist spirit, and the fantasy-filled constructed media persona of an unexpected *kawaii* fraudster. Celebrification partly happened by her fans’ active involvement in tracing, remembering, and interpreting Ririchan’s way of life. Even before her arrest, the fan community spilled over from the online domain to a physical setting, leaving testimonies on encounters with Ririchan in Tokyo’s entertainment district, possibly underscoring the credibility of Ririchan’s accounts of her way of life. In fact, Ririchan’s fans and supporters whom we interviewed were directly in contact with Ririchan (or Watanabe Mai) in real life. While consuming and

contributing to the construction of Ririchan's social media image, several also planned to raise funds to repay the damages caused by Ririchan's schemes and attempt to encourage her to focus on her self-redemption. Others planned to create films, art projects, literary works, and similar works inspired by Ririchan's experiences.

In Ririchan's case, the celebrification of the fraudster appears, at a first glance, to align with the concepts developed by Young (2011) on moral panics by dramatizing the transgressive other, or Penhold-Mounce (2009) on the romanticization of transgressions. However, we argue that Ririchan's fans and supporters were not exclusively fascinated by her criminal activities per se. Rather, they might have been drawn to Ririchan because she seemed to share similar experiences with them, navigating or surviving the realities of a dysfunctional society, being all too familiar with the loneliness and disembeddedness (Young 2007) of the no-longer-realizable middle-class functionality and ideals. Whether nostalgically or cynically, they *empathized* rather than *sympathized* with the transgressor. The sisterhood that Ririchan created via social media was partially followed by practitioners of her systematic fraudulent scheme. However, the sisterhood did not operate in an organized manner but rather was intended to allow the young women to take ownership of their actions by performing transgressions independently. The image of a self-reliant neoliberal entrepreneur who artfully utilizes *kawaii* power to scam *oji* for the purpose of meeting her personal goals,<sup>2</sup> whether cosmetic surgery to improve her appearance, funds to repay her student loans, or the financing of exorbitant investments in a romance game at a host club, is far from that of the essentialized underclass "other" (cf. Young 2007). Rather, we observe that individuals' perceived needs are compelled by a social media asking them to constantly reinvent their personal narratives for social approval in this fluidized contemporary disembeddedness (e.g., Demelius and Yoshida 2025). Behind the celebrification of Ririchan are numerous socioeconomic malaises in Japan: the Confucian-originated gender stratification in domestic settings, in the workplace, and at school; the rigidly patriarchal family registration system, which constrains individuals' choices; and the unreasonable expectations placed on heteronormative gender roles and familial obligations, to name a few. Ririchan's case serves as yet another opportunity to contemplate the notion of empowerment in the contemporary neoliberal economy, which tends to disempower many individuals. Thus, we return to the present paper's guiding question: Is Ririchan an "empowering" female figure? Considering the blurred boundaries that exist between the transgressive others and ourselves, she may prove to be a

<sup>2</sup>This is reminiscent of *kogyaru* that appeared in the 1990s, often associated with "compensated dating" (*enjokōsai*) (Kinsella 2014). According to Kinsella (2014), the subculture driven by male fantasy of schoolgirl prostitution, which made news headlines in the mass media, was initially a cultural production of the male dominant domains of the mass media, government, corporations, male intellectuals, and cultural figures (2014: 39). Criticism of young women and schoolgirls' materialism emphasized the undisciplined nature of their consumption behaviors (Kinsella 2014: 103), and similarity can be drawn with discourses to pathologize young women's consumption at host clubs (ABEMA Prime 2023), which indirectly conjures up the reality of women's difficulty in acquiring financial independence in contemporary Japanese society.

symbolic figure for a thought-provoking alternative outlook that is peculiar but familiar. We wish to conclude this essay with a comment made by an observer of Ririchan's role as a savior among girls: "When a serious girl wants to save other girls, she ends up in criminal activities or sexually explicit work as the landing point" (Sasaki and Masuda 2024:11).

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