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Technologies of the YouTuber self: digital vigilantism, masculinities and attention economy in neoliberal Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates YouTube vigilantism in contemporary Japan. While studies have discussed the relationship between vigilantism and the public police and technology's role in the weaponisation of visibility, attempts to explain the rise of such activities from the perspectives of identity and culture have been scarce. The present study addresses this by exploring vigilante YouTubers in contemporary Japan who share footage of the exposure and occasional arrest of individuals who engage in illegal or illicit activities. It applies Foucault's technologies of the self as a theoretical framework and examines the notions of masculinity and entrepreneurship in neoliberal Japan by focusing on the conceptualisation of vigilantes' identities using social media. The analysis reveals that vigilantes' activities are motivated by the ambition to legitimise their masculinity, moral superiority, and respectable social roles in contemporary Japan, in which hegemonic masculinity, rigid gender-role expectations, and the concept of a well-functioning 'proper' society are re-negotiated.

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Introduction: revisiting the power of gaze

This paper explores the vigilante YouTuber[1] phenomenon in contemporary Japan, by contemplating power, masculinity, and the surveillant gaze. Liberal political participation harnessed by online interactions has embodied problematic engagement and militant political mobilisation (Loveluck, 2015), including hate speech (Bernatzky et al., 2022; Hawdon et al., 2018–2019), harassment (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021), conspiratorial claims (Grasman et al., 2023), and digital vigilantism (Chang & Grabosky, 2017; Trottier, 2020). Amid growing concerns over conceptualising vigilantism in academic discourse (Moncada, 2017), Loveluck distinguishes digital vigilantism from other types of vigilantism by highlighting its distinct characteristics, identifying four main types: 'flagging, investigating, hounding, and organised leaking' (Loveluck, 2020, p. 214). We align with his definition of online interventions, which may 'conform neither to participative ideals nor to due process of policing and law enforcement, but are nonetheless undertaken in

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the name of justice, order, or safety, and may to some extent be considered as a mode of political participation, as well as a form of moral regulation and a response to criminal activities' (Loveluck, 2020, p. 213).

The present study situates digital vigilantism as political action in pursuit of power. We identify the gaze as a key tool for wielding power, a concept that has yet to be explored in the context of digital vigilantism. As we shall demonstrate, vigilante YouTubers attempt to instrumentalise the gaze to obtain power vis-à-vis established power.

The existing scholarship on digital vigilantism often focuses on the notion of 'naming and shaming' alleged perpetrators (e.g. paedophiles) online to humiliate them (e.g. Favarel-Garrigues, 2020; Trottier, 2017, 2020). This resonates with Johnston's (1996) notion of vigilantism as a popularly instigated strategic reaction to real or perceived social deviance to restore order arising from a desire to act (229, 231). Studies of digital vigilantism highlight the use of technology as a unique feature allowing the intensification of public denunciation (Chang & Poon, 2017; Trottier, 2020) and the collective mobilisation of citizens to hunt presumed perpetrators (Chang & Grabosky, 2017; Chang & Zhu, 2020). Others contemplate citizens' involvement in policing affairs as opposed to the authority's legislative framework and problematise various issues arising from digital vigilantism (e.g. Campbell, 2016; Hadjimatheou, 2021; Tippett, 2022). Such studies have explored digital vigilantism from the perspective of an alternative to the existing criminal justice system (CJS) and typically do not consider policing as the fundamental source of power vis-à-vis other societal actors. Herein, we examine cases in which the realisation of security and safety, the restoration of social order, and the regulation of morals are *not* vigilantes' primary concerns in an attempt to transcend the standard approach to digital vigilantism, which was hitherto narrowly defined as a means of controlling crime.

Another characteristic of the extant studies is their scant attention to the issue of identity formation through participation in digital vigilantism. This is due to their overwhelming emphasis on digital vigilantism as a collective phenomenon with less weight afforded to the actors involved. The individuals' identity formation is closely related to power, as the use of power is motivated by how subjects define themselves vis-à-vis 'others' in the imagined or internalised social hierarchy and what they expect to obtain through the exercise of power. While studies have noted that vigilantes may derive emotional (Tippett, 2022) or material (Favarel-Garrigues, 2020) rewards, we are interested in how these rewards contribute to their perceived status in society. We aim to explore the social conditions under which vigilantes desire to form a specific identity and wield power and to provide a tool for approaching digital vigilantism from the perspective of power, self-branding, and identity construction in a neoliberal context, guided by the following research questions: 1) What compels individuals to become vigilante YouTubers, and how does it relate to neoliberal self-responsibility? 2) Can a social media platform serve to construct vigilantes' identities and how they relate to gender norms? The present study contributes to the scholarship of digital vigilantism by focusing on the conceptualisation of vigilantes' identities using social media and interrogates notions of masculinity and entrepreneurship in neoliberal Japan.

Foucault (1977) illustrated how the (possible) presence of an inspector transforms those under his gaze into surveillance subjects, ensuring that they follow the rules. Amit the rise of mass media and social media, the gaze is not simply directed from the powerful in a conventional sense, such as that of state power; the surveillant gaze can also

be directed from below to above, forming what Mathiesen (1997) called a synopticon, from the citizens to their peers, resulting in lateral surveillance (Andrejevic, 2004). While caution is advised in asserting that the rise of citizen-led surveillance has diminished state power (e.g. Nhan et al., 2017), the availability of tools to record and share images of others at low prices has allowed those traditionally deemed powerless to wield powers via their gaze.

The sources of power do not necessarily originate from the exercise of power per se but rather from discursive practices that precede and justify the use of power when necessary (Billig, 1995; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Categorisation – by race, for example – essentialises certain groups and imposes a hierarchy between different groups, legitimising the control wielded by the powerful or those deemed superior (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The recent affective turn observed in both psychology and sociology has highlighted that it is not only discourse that legitimises legal power systems but also affect, which provides a crucial resource in a democratic political system or a supposedly quasi-democratic culture of YouTubers (cf. Jenkins & Deuze, 2008). Ahmed (2004) and Wodak (2021), for instance, demonstrate how the stories about enemies or 'others' often engender fear and anger towards them as well as support for the tellers who appear as the guardians of 'us'. The in-group's affect may also be transmitted into the minds of those deemed 'other', possibly causing them to accept a lesser status through what psychoanalysts have called projective identification (Clarke, 2003). Wetherell (2012) argues that such an intersubjective phenomenon is caused by mundane practices rather than the uncanny function of the unconscious, and gaze would be one such tool (see Gervais et al., 2012 on how the male objectifying gaze can diminish women's capacity). Digital vigilantes' power stems partly from their perceived adeptness in controlling the gaze under the climate of the 'weaponisation of visibility' (Trottier, 2017).

This study draws on Messerschmidt's (2014) situational action theory to exemplify the correlation between policing and identity. According to Messerschmidt, individuals construct identities around sex, gender and sexuality with reference to the relevant norms in given settings. Individuals can only select their discourses from those available to claim power and reproduce the given social structure to align with the gender-related hierarchy in society. Messerschmidt argues that we should treat gendered and sexual agency as 'reflexive embodied structured action' (2014, p. 27). An individual's desire to construct a socially desirable, 'available, encouraged, and permitted' (Messerschmidt, 2014, p. 27) gender identity becomes heightened during social interactions in which they perceive themselves as failing to conform to hegemonic gender ideals. Among the consequences of such circumstances, according to Messerschmidt (2014), is an attempt to reclaim it by engaging in deviant behaviours (Messerschmidt, 2000, 2004, 2012). Such failures include not only encountering subordinated gender identities (e.g. homosexuality) but also falling short of the embodied gender ideals they pursue (e.g. being a feminine hetero-cis-man). Individuals engage in aggressive behaviours, including hate crimes, towards those whom they perceive as inferior yet simultaneously threatening. Such acts of 'doing difference' can enhance the power of the subject (and the class of people to which they believe they belong) (Perry, 2001). Vigilantes' goals are more complex than merely asserting or restoring the desirable social hierarchy; rather, vigilantes endeavour to demonstrate their superiority through alignment with a given social norm – namely, policing and exercising justice, othering those who they consider to be breaching this social norm. These acts of

policing may even be motivated by the desire to gain power and to challenge embodied hegemonic masculinity. Our findings suggest digital vigilantism is a form of political action in pursuit of power and that social media serves as a space for vigilantes' identity (trans)formation and reconfiguration.

The present study will analyse vigilante YouTubers in contemporary Japan from the analytical perspective of Michel Foucault's technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988). The following section will outline the study's theoretical framework.

YouTubers meet technologies of self-transformation – theoretical framework

In her analysis of multi-user domains (MUDs), 'Parallel Lives: Working on Identity in Virtual Space', in *Constructing the Self in a Mediated World* in the 1990s, the media scholar Turkle (1996) highlighted the process by which individuals form identities on MUDs in which cyberspace 'serves as places for the construction and reconstruction of identity' (1996, p. 157). Turkle represented cyberspace as somewhat *separate* from reality, allowing individuals to safely experiment with unexplored selves (172). After the turn of the millennium, the division between the 'digital' and 'real' worlds became blurred (Floridi, 2014), and sociological studies turned their attention to the implications of digital media (Pink, 2015, p. 5). As we increasingly witness 'the digital as part of our worlds' and digital participation intensifies, a non-digital-centric approach to the understanding of the digitalised social world is required (Pink, 2015, p. 7).

For Foucault, technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). The framework of self-transformation – here, technologies – is interconnected with governmentality and power (19). Foucault defined technology as a set of 'practical rationality governed by a conscious goal' (Foucault, 1984, pp. 255–256), implying that individuals' agency and the competent drive for self-modification 'ultimately belong to the same group of technologies' that maintain the operational power structure (Giannachi, 2023, p. 5). Foucault contended that the principal activity of caring for oneself consists of knowing oneself (Foucault, 1988, pp. 25–26, 49).

Foucault's concept of technologies of the self resonates with narrative-focused criminological approaches. Presser and Sandberg (2015) emphasise the role of agency in forming narratives – which contrasts with the postmodern standpoint adopted in Foucault's (1977) earlier work, *Discipline and Punish* – that the social structure decisively influences individuals' narratives, as similarly articulated by Goffman (1959) regarding certain situations' influence on subjects' narratives about their projected self-image. Presser and Sandberg (2015) claim that subjects can construct their self-concept through the constitutive capacity of narratives even in the most adversarial situations, including being convicted of an offence.

Such narratives not only impact the subject's behaviours but also influence their affect. As Farrall and Calverley (2005) analysis of an ex-offender's narrative elucidated, the formation of his narrative, wherein his past is considered shameful vis-à-vis his current rehabilitated self, engendered a sense of pride. Individuals also pursue self-transformation

through moral transcendence (Yoshida & Demelius, 2024). Katz (1988) argued that transgressive behaviours are 'seductive' in their ability to produce a sense of moral transcendence by dismissing social norms. In other words, discourse not only produces power but also evokes a feeling of powerfulness. In the context of digital curatorial practice on online platforms as a manifestation of Foucault's technologies of the self, 'acts of self-exploration and self-cultivation, and self-care … nourish offline identity' (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016, p. 1340).

The sense of powerfulness is afforded not only by the transcendence of social norms but also by challenging professional and epistemic authority (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 10). During the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, alternative health influencers vehemently promoted conspiracy theories and far-right messages fused with lifestyle and wellness culture (Baker, 2022). 'Lifestyle gurus' (Baker & Rojek, 2020) – social media influencers – provide alternative advice on aspects of well-being via social media by appealing to the audience with psychological intimacy and authenticity (Baker & Rojek, 2020, pp. 60–61) in the form of personal narratives offered by 'ordinary members of society' (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 10).

This contagious feedback loop of moral transcendence powered by social media influencers and their followers aligns with entrepreneurship encouraged in a neoliberal context. Floridi observes that the increased sharing of user-generated health-related contents online may risk destabilising the authority healthcare services through 'a democratization of health information' that could alter the notion of 'normality in numbers' endorsed by 'the "everybody does it" factor' (2014, p. 77). Foucault's technologies of the self, based on the motivation of self-care and self-knowledge (Foucault, 1988), cannot be attained simply by an individual's efforts to produce a self-concept in an online milieu. Rather, 'hyper-self-consciousness' (Floridi, 2014, p. 61) online is constantly attached to the notion of digital gaze encouraging individuals to construct social selves that further develop their self-conception, 'which then feeds back into the moulding of [their] personal identity' (64).

This cycle decentralises personal agentic interests and eases the neoliberal pressures of self-responsibility. Baker and Rojek assert that 'lifestyle gurus' narratives of self-improvement and self-transformation are part of contemporary society's yearning for perfection that 'treats the goals of acceptance, approval, social impact and self-validation as universally desirable' (2020, p. 11). Social media influencers (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 80) lure audiences into believing that followers of 'positive self-knowledge' shared by the influencers will alleviate social and economic anxieties that may have resulted from social injustice, inequality, discrimination and social engineering (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 11).

Visibility in social media is one of the most crucial elements of online activities; accordingly, 'social media influencers … pursue fame professionally as a vocation' (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 80). Herbert A. Simon succinctly expressed that a wealth of information consumes the recipient's attention (Simon, 1971), and Michael H. Goldhaber similarly argued that attention is a scarce resource in the economic model driven by digital information (Goldhaber, 1997). The attention economy based on online visibility is fostered by the social media ecosystem in which advertising revenues are created on social media platforms. This social media ecosystem involves social media influencers, audiences and industries in 'the creation, commodification, analysis, and circulation of data audiences for purposes including but not limited to digital advertising

and marketing' (van der Vlist et al., 2021, p. 1). The algorithmic features of social media train users to be 'rewarded with more visibility, but otherwise the threat of invisibility haunts [them]' (Mahon Mc, 2020, p. 46). Thus, neoliberal self-affirmation and self-branding algorithmically influence and motivate those actively engaging with social media. Several scholars in Japan have warned of the increasingly compromised quality of information in the attention economy, which may jeopardise democracy (Toriumi & Yamamoto, 2022, pp. 18–19).

As people increasingly turn to the internet for information and entertainment, a new type of entrepreneurship has emerged: that of 'conspiracy theory entrepreneurs' whose monetising ventures include disseminating mis/disinformation and denouncing the existing order (Campion-Vincent, 2020). Reflecting on well-known conspiracy theorists and entrepreneurs, Campion-Vincent highlights the difficulty in determining the degree to which they genuinely believe in their own theories and what the author calls 'stigmatised knowledge' (2020, pp. 64, 65). Carefully crafted authenticity is also evident in lifestyle gurus' self-branding efforts whereby they selectively present and conceal material to align with their images on social media (Baker & Rojek, 2020, pp. 68, 70, 75). Vigilante YouTubers also exhibit a compelling degree of entrepreneurship, and this is a critical element of their self-transformation in their ventures. However, the statement, 'authenticity is strategically enacted by lifestyle gurus to increase their engagement rate and online following' (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 68), denotes that actors' public personas and their private selves and/or emotions are assumed to be different. We contend that inquiries into value-laden binaries, such as authenticity – inauthenticity or public – private, should *not* be our concern. Instead, we see the significance in the processes in which individuals accomplish self-transformation (Foucault, 1988, p. 19) through experiencing the symbiosis of such dualisms (Frosh, 2001) in the era of performative authenticity as a form of social capital (Baker & Rojek, 2020) and brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Toft et al., 2020). The embodied contemporary anxieties surrounded by inauthenticity prompt cravings for 'anything that *feels* authentic' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 3). Herein, we position the vigilante practice of 'naming and shaming' as the extension of the contemporary fascination for authenticity and power, as also manifested in the form of self-discovery (Baker & Rojek, 2020), spiritual elevation (Ward & Voas, 2011), revelations of secret organisations and evil individuals (Campion-Vincent, 2020).

Neoliberal Japan and coping with hegemonic masculinity

Despite Japan's economic stagnancy and neoliberal restructuring since the 1990s, the omnipresence of salaryman masculinity – the hegemonic ideal typically associated with a 'middle-class, university-educated middle-aged man, with a dependent wife and children to support, working for an organization offering such benefits as secure lifetime employment … ' (Dasgupta, 2012, p. 1) – remains entrenched in contemporary Japanese society (9, 25). The use of hegemonic masculinity as an analytical lens (cf. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018), particularly of salaryman masculinity after the development of a rich body of scholarship on the concept (e.g. Cook, 2016, 2017; Dasgupta, 2010, 2012; Roberson, 2005), may risk overlooking the complexities of diverse living experiences in Japan (Cook, 2019, p. 55). As the term *salaryman* suggests, the discourse around the salaryman has

been closely intertwined with the notion of work (Cook, 2013; Dasgupta, 2012, p. 5), setting the normative undertone of *shakaijin* – a responsible and respectable adult – in Japanese society. Family and the workplace are the two most critical institutions for Japanese men (Gill, 2003, p. 150). The transition from adolescence to *shakaijin* also applies to the female counterpart, who is expected to assume a caregiving role in the private sphere as a wife and mother. Individuals' lives, through childhood, adolescence, and responsible adulthood to retirement, are marked by various rites of passage, setting expectations for different phases in their lives' trajectories. Women's underrepresentation in the labour market and politics is often regarded as epitomising Japan's gendered hierarchy, with the country currently ranking 118th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2024). Meanwhile, considering that less than 10% of children are born outside of wedlock and that many young people have internalised the social norm of a nuclear family and heterosexual marriage (Sambe, 2019, pp. 183–184), the idealisation of the male figure as the head of the household and a provider exerts considerable pressure on men in Japanese society (Gill, 2003, p. 145). The construction of socially approved adult masculinities is particularly difficult in neoliberal Japan due to the propagated values firmly attached to the old middle-class society, and it also complicates individuals' self-image, which depends considerably on society's judgement (Cook, 2016, pp. 12, 16). Since the financial crisis in the 1990s, in particular, along with an increase in female labour participation, many men 'feel an unexplained, or unexplainable, deprivation', contributing to 'a crisis of masculinity' (Itō & Alexy, 2023, p. 175). The hegemonic ideal, which works in tandem with the life-trajectory-oriented expectations, is also relevant to those who deviate beyond the definitional parameters of salaryman masculinity (Dasgupta, 2012, p. 9). This has been well documented in studies of socio-cultural negotiations by men from younger generations (Mathews, 2003); day-labourers untethered to families and workplaces (Gill, 2003); working-class masculinities (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003); the compromised desirability of employed men without full-benefit contracts (Cook, 2019); *himote* (unpopular men) (Nishii, 2021); part-time workers (Cook, 2013, 2016); and intimacy as a burden for young Japanese men (Miles, 2019).

With a shift from the expectation that men will assume the role of sole breadwinner role to an ideal whereby they will simultaneously support childrearing and become good communicators (Mathews, 2014), Japanese society remains intolerant towards single men (T. Tanaka, 2015) and those without 'decent jobs' (Heinrich & Imai, 2020, p. 81). Considering the unavailability of valued work (Slater & Galbraith, 2011) and an increase in labour contracts without welfare provisions in neoliberal Japan, the ideal of *productive manhood*, which is crystallised by the intersecting self-image of gender, sexuality, class, and nation – has become increasingly threatened (Heinrich & Imai, 2020; Mathews, 2014; Roberson & Suzuki, 2003; T. Tanaka, 2015). This directly affects the desirability of men, who must compete for love and intimacy in contemporary Japan in a pursuit that increasingly functions as 'a form of work [and] social recognition comparable to one's occupational and company status' (Miles, 2019, p. 150). Men who internalise their perceived undesirability occasionally act out in desperation, and a grudge against women or society has been considered the motive for several public attacks committed by so-called *jakusha dansei* (marginalised men) in recent years (see Miles, 2019; Slater & Galbraith, 2011).

Meanwhile, several signs indicate that the 'salaryman' hegemony has been shaken, particularly as regards gender politics. With increasingly precarious job security in the labour market, Japanese men are less attached to work, promoting a significant attitude shift towards married life (Mathews, 2014, p. 64). As the fall of the Japanese economy and the rise of women within the labour force have eroded the hegemony's legitimacy, 'salarymen' have come to connote sexual harassment, constraints on their wives' freedom or failed marriages as a result of their devotion to their employers (Alexy, 2020). Younger generations are more inclined towards spending time with their families and partners than after-work drinks with colleagues (Dasgupta, 2012). Japan has thus witnessed the emergence of new identities for men, such as *ikumen* (fathers who are actively involved in childrearing) – the concept initially introduced by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2010 in an attempt to alleviate the burden of gendered expectation on women as caregivers and increase their participation in the labour market – despite the sheer scepticism surrounding the feasibility of fathers' full involvement in childcare and an aversion to the hype around the term (Mizukoshi et al., 2016). More recently, some men have attempted to attach a positive meaning to the term 'househusband' (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2022). Moreover, changes in values regarding work may have eroded the support for the salaryman's way of life (Mathews, 2014), which is typically characterised by lifelong employment in exchange for devotion to one's employers and has sometimes resulted in *karoshi* (overwork death). According to the Office's (2024) national census, respondents in 2023 believe that an ideal job is one that does not negatively impact their well-being (from 23.0% in 1997 to 35.2% in 2023); and that is enjoyable (from 36.3% in 1997 to 54.2% in 2023); and one that contributes to society (from 13.5% in 1997 to 23.0% in 2023). It should also be noted that salary-related factors, such as 'stable income' (from 49.2% in 1997 to 62.2% in 2023) and 'a high salary' (from 9.2% in 1997 to 22.2% in 2023), are also increasing in importance, possibly reflecting Japan's decades-long downward economic trend. Nonetheless, the statistics indicate that well-being has become a significant factor of a job selection, which was previously ignored.

Digital vigilantism in Japan

In Japan, digital vigilantism has been widely discussed in the context of flaming (see Ogigami, 2007; T. Tanaka & Yamaguchi, 2016). Activities such as 'flagging' (raising awareness of issues), 'web-sleuthing' (identifying those responsible for issues), and 'hounding' (punishing individuals causing the issues) (Loveluck, 2020) often accompany flaming in various scenarios. These include addressing illegal activities, such as corporate fraud, as well as illicit behaviours, such as harassment of shopkeepers by customers or other relatively minor misconduct (Ogigami, 2007; T. Tanaka & Yamaguchi, 2016). Digital vigilantism is also evident in political contexts. For example, far-right activists harass minorities, motivated by online xenophobic rhetoric (Yamaguchi, 2013), while other groups engage in activities to counteract the dissemination of such rhetoric (Löschke, 2022). Both of these phenomena can be regarded as forms of hounding. Notably, there are similarities between far-right activists and vigilante YouTubers studied in this research, as both are significantly driven by the attention and recognition they receive from online audiences (Yamaguchi, 2013; Yoshida & Demelius, 2024).

While exposing certain wrongdoings has undeniably benefited the public – particularly when it concerns consumer safety (Ogigami, 2007) – digital vigilantism has also led to serious issues. For instance, a comedian was wrongfully identified as the perpetrator of a high-profile juvenile murder case in 1989 and has suffered persistent harassment since 1999, despite repeatedly denying the allegations (T. Tanaka & Yamaguchi, 2016). Wrongful accusations online have occurred in other cases involving juvenile criminals, whose identities are typically withheld by Japanese media (e.g. K. Shimbun, 2015).

In this study, we aim to generate theoretical implications and obtain transferrable knowledge (Firestone, 1993) about the motivations behind and utilities of digital vigilantism, which might or might not apply to understanding digital vigilantism in other contexts. We acknowledge that generalisability in qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, may not involve making inferences about a larger population based on a smaller sample (see Drisko, 2024). Thus, we do not intend to produce a statistically generalisable insight into digital vigilantism in Japan, much less digital vigilantism in a general sense.

By the same token, our findings based on a small sample from Japan may not be generalisable to all vigilante YouTubers. However, we recognise that the case of Tokyo Avengers is academically significant from the perspective of two distinct research gaps: 1) digital vigilantism as political action in pursuit of power and 2) the use of social media for digital vigilantism as space for identity formation. While limited in number, the richness of the interviews and the in-depth analysis yields a high degree of 'information power' sufficient to illustrate the interplay between the technology, culture and biographies of the research participants (Malterud et al., 2016), which is integral to ensure the transferability of the case (Firestone, 1993).

Data and methods

This study analyses three different kinds of data: data from interviews with vigilantes conducted by the authors between August 2023 and July 2024; publications from four online vigilantes; and publicly available online materials posted by six online vigilantes, including videos, interviews and posts from their channels on online domains. Online posts made by the vigilantes consist of video materials and interviews, but their comment posts on domains such as X, TikTok, and Instagram are not included as their identities as YouTubers preceded others. For the recruitment of in-person interviewees, we first contacted one of the vigilante YouTubers who published his email address on his Twitter account. After one of the authors interviewed him, he agreed to meet the other author and introduced us to other vigilante YouTubers. We emailed the Participant Information Sheet to the vigilante YouTubers after the initial exchanges and obtained written consent from them prior to the interview. The interviews were audio-recorded and hand-transcribed, and the interviewees were pseudonymised. The five interviews totalled 15 hours. The study follows the ethics guidelines of the authors' institutions.

The technical limitations of digital platforms, coupled with the difficulty of accessing hard-to-reach groups, can constrain sample size and data collection efforts. Given the public nature of their actions on social media and the limited scope of their operations, researchers might face ethical dilemmas, such as safeguarding research participants' identities and navigating potential conflicts with the formal criminal justice system.

The vigilante YouTubers we approached in person were part of a group called the Tokyo Avengers (pseudonym), consisting of 'approximately 10 people' (all male) who rotate roles and tasks among them, including performing and producing media content, video editing, filming, and other peripheral roles such as those of guards, drivers, and negotiators, depending on the cases they undertake. The YouTubers we interviewed operated their own respective YouTube channels under their stage names and addressed different genres of vigilantism. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 40 years old (20s, 2 persons; 30s, 1 person; 40s, 2 persons), and all participants possessed low to moderate levels of formal education, with none having attained a tertiary qualification. The members are united by the mission of 'eradicating crimes' – bank transfer fraud, investment scams, prostitution, and scalping – that they perceive as 'socially significant'.

Although many interviewees had criminal records, as detailed later, the interviews were conducted without causing any fear of harm. Our communication during the interviews was friendly and polite. We were concerned that they might suggest broadcasting the interviews – something that could have happened, given the willingness of some YouTubers to share personal aspects of their lives – but this did not occur. Nevertheless, there were occasional challenges. On some occasions, interviewees did not show up because they had been arrested by the police. The relationships among vigilante YouTubers were unstable, sometimes making it difficult to ask them to introduce other potential participants. Their desire for an 'authentic' form of justice sometimes led to the exposure of other vigilantes' wrongdoings, creating tension in their relationships.

Some vigilante YouTubers in Japan publish books in which they typically reflect on their lives, share their experiences of online vigilantism and/or explain their motivations and goals. We used *Dark Part-Time Job Finished My Life: Warning from a Former Ringleader of a Fraud Group* by 'Funaim' (Funaim, 2023) and *Charge! Shinjuku 109 Diary of Activities to Eliminate Frauds and MLM* (2024) as primary sources. We also included a book entitled *Whistleblowing: the Horrendous Dark Side of SNS that Nobody Has Exposed* by well-known live YouTuber Korekore (2023) and *Record of Online Game War* by an influential Twitter user Akane (2024). The web celebrities Korekore and Himasora Akane would not identify themselves as vigilantes. However, the former, a trailblazer among Japan's YouTubers with 2.18 million subscribers (as of April 2024), has inspired those who seek audience attention by engaging with controversial activities. The latter focuses on disseminating various information exposing 'wrongdoings' to approximately 270,000 followers. Several of this study's participants used Himasora's information.

Regarding the positionality of the researchers, it would be necessary to state how our backgrounds might have influenced the study, especially the data collection and analysis processes. First, our 'dual' background as researchers with Japanese nationalities from foreign universities may have facilitated the recruitment process. The fact that the interviewees expressed nationalist sentiments and that their group includes at least one YouTuber involved in nationalistic activities suggests they might not have been willing to participate in our study if we had foreign nationalities, particularly Chinese or South Korean, which could be associated with a far-right agenda (Yoshida & Demelius, 2024). At the same time, some interviewees explicitly mentioned that they were pleased to receive attention from 'Western' scholars, viewing it as a sign of growing recognition. The first author identifies as a woman, while the second author identifies as a man, which has also provided a nuanced understanding of how

masculinity plays a role in their narratives: the former became aware of the influence of masculine norms, while the latter offered insights into how these norms operate within the Japanese context, drawing from his expertise in the academic discussion of masculinity in Japan. Additionally, it is essential to note that the second author's background as a former member of the Japanese police force allowed him to be more critical of the vigilantes' attitudes, which could be characterised by a lack of confidence in public law enforcement. However, we believe that this tendency was balanced by the first author's recognition that they are indeed tackling some issues that the police have failed to address.

Analysis

The following sections present our primary data using thematic analysis. Both researchers analysed all the collected data to compare our interpretations, thereby enhancing the study's credibility. The application of thematic analysis was deemed more appropriate as our data is relatively small and requires in-depth analysis as content analysis was more suitable for handling large data, for example, comment posts on platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram. We identified 14 different themes and 11 additional sub-themes. We organised them and drew out five main clusters of concepts aligned with the main emphases of this paper: digital vigilantism as political action in pursuit of power and identity formation. These five clusters of concepts represent: 1) anti-ordinary/anti-mainstream/edge-work and eudaimonic enjoyment, 2) attention economy/societal good, 3) difficult upbringing/proximity to criminality/troubled masculinity, 4) alternative justice/public morals/masculinity and dignity, and 5) knowledge/power pursuit/identity reconfiguration.

The legitimisation of the non-ordinary (life) work

A distinct characteristic of the vigilantes' narratives is the delicate negotiations between their desire for social approval and their self-characterisation as 'non-ordinary' and 'anti-ordinary'. The vigilante YouTubers we analysed acknowledged their 'non-ordinary' or 'anti-ordinary' disposition in Japanese society in terms of marginalisation: 'victim of fierce bullying' (Korekore 2023, p. 259), 'ex-convict' (Funaim, 2023), 'grew up in an institution (orphanage)' (2024, p. 10), 'an ex-member of the yakuza' (Nakashima, 2023), 'social misfit', 'can't work under someone', 'severe ADHD', 'poor educational background', 'raised by a single mother', 'a severely impoverished background', 'unintelligent', 'immature', 'unruly', and 'abused by the stepfather'. This complex sense of inferiority, wherein biological, socio-economic, and familial issues converge, might be similar to *ikizurasa*, a sense of alienation from the ordinary without an apparent cause (Kido, 2022). This distressing sense of alienation may cause an identity crisis. As KENZO confesses, 'I have wanted to be someone (big) since my childhood" (2024, p. 27). Considering Japan's rigid gender-role expectations, this sense of inferiority is often enhanced by exposure to a subordinated and disadvantaged female figure while growing up, and the conspicuous entanglement with their own marginalised masculinity is a major source of struggle.

According to Neo (M, 20s), 'Contemporary (Japanese) society is polarised: *shakaijin* (responsible and respectable adult) or people like us (those who are not ordinary,

including Tokyo Avengers)'. The statement implies that being a responsible adult is socially acceptable while being a vigilante YouTuber is not.

> I believe *shakaijin* have harmonious cooperativeness. But this doesn't mean they are right; that's a different story. As *shakaijin*, they have social manners. [. . .] It's necessary to be cooperative in order to work in an ordinary society. It's a bit funny to say, 'people without harmonious cooperativeness', but people like us have a compromised sense of harmony, so a platform like YouTube is the most suitable space.

Neo's statements insinuate that the opportunities for self-expression and self-actualisation offered by social media platforms are closely tied to the notion of work as a means to an end. He contends that YouTube functions as though the domain provides a workplace for 'non-ordinary people who *cannot make it* in ordinary society to make a living'. Meanwhile, he exhibits a sense of pride in his pursuit of a *meaningful life* as opposed to the life within a presumed 'ordinary society' that does not offer freedom, such as by following rigid time schedules and regimens typified in Japanese work habits and states that 'not everybody wants to work like that'. Their self-defined marginalised statuses have transformed into empowered selves through the pursuit of digital vigilantism. For the members of Tokyo Avengers, their vigilante activities provide them with a comprehensive package that satisfies their desires for social recognition and appreciation by 'helping others, demonstrating social significance, eradicating crimes, and becoming big'.

Sigma (M, 40s) remarked that his pursuit as a vigilante YouTuber is closely intertwined with 'a play' with his fellow members. This sense of camaraderie is reminiscent of a possible antidote for the loss of his family members and the sense of despair he had experienced in his life.

Sigma: If we cooperate, we can become big . . . We all benefit from a synergistic effect. I became very close to them . . . My life has changed since I met Goku. I do a lot of things with him. We saw each other yesterday. Our [vigilante] activities are our private lives. Whenever we meet, it's about our [vigilante] activities, and they are, at the same time, our private lives. We celebrated Mojo's birthday, but other than that, everything is about our activities. Our [vigilante] activities are like our play time – that's how I see them. It's a play. Our play is our work; our work is our play. That's why it's fun!

YY: What's the fun part?

Sigma: I can help people and contribute to society. Plus, I gain spiritual fulfilment. I can be together with [Tokyo Avengers'] members and communicate [to the world] via online platforms.

The masculinity that Sigma attempts to emulate may be regarded as what Cook (2016) called 'aspirational masculinity'. Cook (2016) argued that men who work in precarious jobs perform an alternative form of masculinity to that of the hegemonic 'salaryman' by drawing on neoliberal discourses of manhood that emphasise the importance of

individuals setting and pursuing their own goals like entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, the concept of 'a man as a provider' as the epitome of a dignified man – compatible with salaryman masculinity (see Cook, 2016) – is deeply embedded in their narratives. The vigilantes' words point to the addictive nature of digital vigilantism, which offers the opportunities to exercise one's justice over others, identify the 'weak' to secure vigilantes' own heroic gratification, transform themselves into empowered actors, provide them with a tightly knit homosocial community, enlighten them with a life purpose, and finally, supply them with financial rewards that lend distinction to their manhood and legitimacy. As Sigma pointed out, the Tokyo Avengers had yet to meet any female vigilantes within Japan's online vigilante community: 'There're no women in Tokyo Avengers [. . .] Fundamentally, the activities are for men. 'There're women who would help us undertake a case, but there're no performers. Even now, there're no female performers'.

Although it is not always consistent with the gendered role division, gender elements are often integral to vigilante YouTubers' conceptualisation of 'the weak'. For instance, Sigma uses the term 'girl' (*onnanoko*) whenever the woman (*josei*) is deemed worth 'saving' and helping in his 'crime eradication activities', and he often adds adjectives such as 'cute', 'sweet', and 'poor' to describe a helpless target. He likened himself to a father figure within a community who put an end to delinquency among young children in the neighbourhood as he sought to eradicate what he regarded as youth delinquency in the Shinjuku area. Another YouTuber outlined who he considers to be 'cool people':

> All the cool people I met were really kind to people in weaker positions, such as women, children, dogs, cats, the elderly, and vulnerable people. They protect the weak and help them, and I still admire them (those cool people). Considering that, I chose this (digital vigilantism). I want to help people in weaker positions as much as possible. I want to be helpful. (Nakashima, 2023)

Nakashima's YouTube channel, which specialises in 'the eradication of groping in trains', suggests that the self-depiction of heroism appears to be a critical motivation. His flashy techniques of private arrests involve aggressive martial arts moves to pin down 'perpetrators' on the train station premises, prompting various train companies in Tokyo to simultaneously warn that such acts are not permitted (NHK, 2023). Considering that the audience's reactions and a high-volume viewership translate into monetary gains, the production of gendered heroism further accentuates the victim – saviour portrayal in the media content, and Nakashima's channel depicts Nakashima as a brave and socially admired saviour and helpless girls as victims (Nakajima, 2023). Accordingly, the YouTuber selects straightforward material to maintain his masculine dignity and power while remaining 'non-ordinary'. It should also be noted that the phenomenon of groping in the packed trains that run through the Japan's metropolises is associated with salarymen (Alexy 2020). In this sense, Nakashima's activities may be regarded as a direct antithesis to salaryman masculinity.

Proximity to criminality

Possibly one of the most evidently anti-ordinary characteristics of the vigilante YouTubers analysed in the present study is that some have or have previously had proximity to criminality as a victim, as a perpetrator or both. For instance, Funaim had served a prison

sentence of more than four years for fraud that he had committed as a leader of an organised fraud group (Funaim, 2023). Nakashima was formerly a member of the yakuza (Nakashima, 2023). KENZO lost his money to a multi-level marketing (MLM) scheme but subsequently became a recruiter for another MLM scheme (2024). Korekore mentions that he was victimised by click fraud (Korekore, 2023). Several of the vigilante YouTubers who participated in this study are or were in a marginal position or vulnerable situation, which is/was the source of their close connection to criminality.

Resonating with the findings that there is a victim – perpetrator overlap in the world of financial crime (Kerstens & Jansen, 2016), according to Neo, those who would be involved in underworld part-time jobs or MLM or 'hosts' are 'people who can't do day jobs'. He also labels them as 'unintelligent' and 'unpopular as men', stating that 'good-looking guys don't [get victimised and] ask for help'. These categorisations align with a neoliberalist competitive order and Darwinian evolutionary theory: *survival of the fittest*.

Neo: I believe many of those involved in [underworld part-time jobs] can't manage regular interpersonal relationships. [. . .]

YD: So, would you say that those on the operational side of illegal part-time jobs and those who get tricked overlap?

Neo: Yes, there's a fine line between (those two groups) . . . a really fine line. Or even overlapping. In slightly different circumstances, victims can be on the operational side. I believe YouTubers also resemble them. I do believe that.

YD: So, you believe that there's only a fine line.

Neo: Yes, I do. At the same time, I could utilise this situation of being trusted [by the audience and followers] to con people and make money. Well, I have a sort of self-righteousness, so I wouldn't . . .

Interestingly, these contradictory narratives coexist in the Tokyo Avengers. The phenomenon that may be called the 'victim – offender – vigilante overlap' benefits the YouTubers in several ways. As Neo indicated, refraining from exploiting the vulnerable – even if they know how to do it well – highlights their moral superiority. Moreover, the narrative of proximity to the criminal world forms their sense of self-overcoming while taking advantage of their insightfulness. At the same time, their position in the 'grey zone' between criminality and justifiable enterprise allows these non- or anti-ordinary individuals to exact revenge on the marginality they have been experiencing. Their ambivalent stance towards mainstream society is evident from the words that adorn the cover of KENZO's book: 'Here comes the dark hero of the Reiwa era!' (2024).

In a similar vein, in Funaim's (2023) memoir of his arrest and life in prison as the former leader of a fraud group, the YouTuber considers his knowledge of fraudulent schemes as

giving him an edge in warning the public against such schemes because he 'understands how a con man thinks' (2023, 202–203). Again, he appears to exhibit self-overcoming narratives while letting the public know that 'it was all too easy' to stray from the correct path and become a con man (2023, 35–38) by demonstrating the reality of the vulnerable self. Whether he desires sympathy from his readers is difficult to determine, but the circumstantial factors that lead marginalised men to become involved in fraud – as either perpetrators or victims – are highlighted (see, e.g. Hirosue, 2023, Nakajima, 2023).

Alternative justice

Another means by which vigilante YouTubers can claim their non-mainstream legitimacy is to exact justice by alternative means. Their justice is not necessarily based on the same as that which is accepted in the public CJS. Sigma defined justice as 'complying with ethics and morals', while according to Neo, 'justice is a matter of one's conviction, in the first place [. . .] I have my own justice, but I don't think that is the same as everyone else's. I don't know how to put this, but I am doing [the activities] knowing there are criticisms or other perspectives'. This somewhat postmodern attitude towards justice is reflected in the interviewees' narratives; all interviewees mentioned they do not intend to 'impose justice'. Neo even likened his activities to those of 'traditional' yakuza in that they offered a safeguard of citizens in exchange for some revenue. The yakuza – which is usually regarded as a criminal organisation – is invoked here in terms of a righteous neighbourhood watcher with the addition of the term 'traditional' to suggest legitimacy. Here, the surveillant gaze over the neighbourhood is legitimised. The abandonment of legitimisation of their activities seems to suggest the assumption on their part that their legitimacy should ultimately be supported by the audience, echoing the neoliberalist rationale in the YouTuber economy.

However, it should be noted that vigilante YouTubers do not completely dismiss the public CJS. Instead, by reflecting their general attitude towards mainstream society as described above, their narratives about the police are fragmented. On the one hand, they understand that they are needed as they amend the security deficit offered by CJS (Campbell, 2016). Neo expresses his frustration with the police, who are reluctant to process the reports of victimisation from his YouTube followers and audience. Mojo (M, 30s) similarly laments the insufficient number of arrests and filed cases for violence against women in public spaces. The police force's perceived lack of engagement with a problem, which results in their followers' giving tip-offs, is also regarded as one of the conditions contributing to the attractiveness of online video content (2024, p. 134). Comparably, Neo was aware that some of the tactics that he used in his video production might be considered illegal and result in his arrest by the police. This fear of arrest inherently conflicts with the desire to garner views by producing dramatic video content (2024, p. 39).

Meanwhile, they appreciate recognition from the police. Sigma stated that he wanted an award from the police, partly due to the legitimacy that it would confer on his activities. Their appreciation also reinforces their aspiration to have their non-ordinary lives approved by society. According to Sigma,

> Police officers tell me that they envy me because [according to them],

> We belong to an organisation, so we cannot act as freely as YouTubers, as we have to act based on the orders of upper ranks. Your activities make me feel envious, and I appreciate it so much that you do what we want to do but we cannot.

Here, the alienation from society is framed as an advantage to attaining 'true' justice that 'salaryman' police officers cannot obtain. Such (re)positioning is reminiscent of neoliberal commodified yet entrepreneurial masculine selves represented by so-called 'hosts' who pride themselves in earning exorbitant amounts of money, allowing them to entertain female clients in exchange for participation in a highly competitive industry (Takeyama, 2010). Vigilante YouTubers in this study similarly demonstrate their acquisition of legitimacy – and power – by tactically repositioning themselves and attaining perceived moral supremacy. However, even if they do not follow the orders of their superiors, this does not mean that they are freed from any constraints. Their justice activities depend on the audience for their YouTube videos. *Seken* – a concept that denotes 'a world of human relations governed by the unwritten rules and regulations' that does not respect individuality (Matsui, 2024, v-vi) – is 'potentially scarier', considering vigilante YouTubers' reliance on their social media followers. Similarly, in 2024, p. 142) personal memoir, he warned his fellow YouTubers that '*seken* will be scary if you turn them against yourselves. If your activities get too radical, [your channels] will be deleted' before several of his comrades were arrested.

Knowledge and power

Owing to their perceived lack of knowledge and – to a degree – education, expressions such as 'I'm unintelligent' or 'I'm uneducated' occasionally surfaced during the interviews with Sigma and Neo. However, Neo is aware that knowledge ultimately protects him from being arrested or failing at his projects during his vigilante activities.

Neo: I failed a few times when I initially started [as a vigilante YouTuber]. I charged at some sites, but I was persuaded by their argument. I was so frustrated [for not having enough knowledge], so I studied hard. There is this new thing called NFT (non-fungible token) on top of cryptocurrency, so I met somebody who knows it well yesterday and is currently learning about it.

YD: Don't you have to study much, including legal knowledge?

Neo: I must regularly contact the Finance Bureau.

YD: Oh, I see. Do you study a lot more now than when you were a student?

Neo: I study more now (laughter).

Korekore's (2023) book fundamentally demonstrates that informationally disadvantaged populations [*jouhou jakusha*], such as his primary audience, teens and the youth, are the common targets of fraud, bullying, and sex crimes. The role of vigilante YouTubers is to provide them with information. Neo states, I don't think making citizen arrests and taking [the criminals to the police] are my job [. . .] Maximum I can do practically is to raise awareness [of crimes] by making videos so that there will not be new, future victims. This attitude may stem from law enforcers' tendency to frame individuals as responsible for their victimisation when it is often difficult to arrest criminals due to the geographical location of the suspects or lack of resources (Black et al., 2019; Cross, 2020). In this self-responsibilising narrative regarding security, aligned with neoliberalism (Cross, 2020), the vigilante YouTubers in this study appear to enjoy a unique authority as what may be called *security gurus*. Moreover, the acquisition of knowledge in preparation for confrontation is essential to managing risks associated with video-making, such as counterattacks from their targets (2024, pp. 44, 132). Such edgework, which requires expertise to manage risks, brings about a heightened sense of agency after survival (Lyng, 1990), potentially fulfiling their sense of alienation.

As Mathews (2002) argued, the Japanese sense of masculinity is often discursively equated with finding a sense of *ikigai* – a life worth living. Neo addresses that '[his] existence today makes people who cannot depend on lawyers and the police' come to him for help. He proudly stated,

> I helped a kid recently. I paid the transportation fees for the kid (to visit the perpetrator together) . . . and we got back about 600,000 yen (USD 4,000) after negotiating with the con man. But even in this case, it was quite tricky. If I had made a slight mistake, it could have been extortion. If I accepted any recompense for my successful contribution to the recovery of the loss, it would have been a violation of attorney law. It was just barely legal. [. . .] But still, I feel that continuing these activities gives me the sensation of *ikigai*.

Neo's careful crafting of his edgework represents the pinnacle of his knowledge, personal attentiveness, skills, and self-actualisation of heroism. Neo's confidence as a dependable hero is phenomenologically experienced and is directly supported by his tenacious attempt to accumulate legal and market knowledge.

The making of a saviour based on knowledge and experience also applies to Korekore's (2023) self-representation as 'the King of Live YouTuber who simultaneously connects 310,000 viewers'(25) on his channel in which he openly engages with his audience during live broadcasts to solve a variety of problems encountered by the youth. As of November 2022, he had over 1,900,000 registered followers (Korekore, 2023, p. 26). He also presents himself as a dependable figure by positioning himself as older and more experienced than his audience. His *relatability* to his followers is maintained as he openly shares his 'past' as a person who used to be 'an introvert with social anxiety who suffered from social withdrawal and loneliness' (324), which boosts his authenticity (cf. Baker & Rojek, 2020) – a quality that is particularly appreciated in contemporary society – while showcasing himself as the antithesis of the masculine ideals. Inviting audience participation, he assumes an authoritative role by featuring occasional public shaming on live broadcasts to accuse evildoers and expose wrongdoings (Korekore, 2023).

Korekore also validates an alternative masculinity. His supporters are 'mostly women' in their 20s (Korekore, 2023, p. 41), and he outs himself as 'popular among women' despite his self-deprecatory description of his own physical features in his book (41). He is particularly proud of cases of actual police arrests based on the material on his live channel. Of these, the case of a popular YouTuber that led to the latter's eventual arrest for a violation of the Act on Regulation and Punishment of Acts Relating to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and the Protection of Children occupies over 20 pages of his 340-page book (Korekore, 2023, pp. 43–66).

The possession of knowledge is not limited to its use for others. Funaim's (2023) book states that knowledge was applied to reflection on his own crimes, past wrongdoings, victims, and their families and his own family while in prison. He describes the process of realising 'how selfish [he has] been' (99). He obtained a high school diploma and other certificates during his imprisonment, and the time in prison allowed him to study, work and accumulate self-knowledge by following the everyday regime (98–103). He sees himself today as 'a reborn self with a new soul' (127). Determining whether this writing represents his genuine thoughts or a 'performative' authenticity is not the primary concern. The opportunity for self-reflection appears to have prompted him to write daily entries in his diary, which, according to him, was an unknown habit as he had never used his time prior to his arrest to face and search for his honest self (Funaim 2023, pp. 207–211). Since his return to the 'free world', his self-knowledge of *deviance* has driven his vigilante activities (2023, 138).

Attention economy

For the Tokyo Avengers, the desire to enact justice while attaining self-actualisation and obtaining recognition does not cause any moral conflict with the financial gains their YouTube channels might bring. According to our data, a 'good month' for a successful Avenger amounts to a payment of 8 million yen per month (USD 50,000) as an advertisement revenue from YouTube. Sigma explains the Avengers' individual objectives:

> Each has conviction. For example, Atsushi would say [. . .], 'I just want to do this. Evil is evil'. Haruki is interested in political activities. Goku is doing it to get money without any feelings of shame. Neo [. . .] wants to eradicate fraud and also because he can earn money. Mojo is, well, partly motivated by money, but he wants to crush criminals as there are actually people who are victimised.

However, it is crucial to state that Avengers' channels simultaneously contribute to a social economy that is invigorated by *public attention*. In this sense, the YouTubers' goals can only be attainable when the audience approves, follows, and reacts to their channels. Vigilante YouTubers' performative or authentic selves come into existence based on their channels' existence, in line with the concept of *ibasho*, often translated as a place or community where one feels at home, safe, and empowered with a sense of belonging (H. Tanaka, 2021). Their vigilante selves, then, depend on their channels' survival. According to 2024),

> YouTubers can basically sustain their activities as long as the audience watches [their videos]. In other words, if you are boring, you cannot be a YouTuber. That's why I always bear in mind that the videos should be entertaining [. . .] my 'charges' are actual footage. Because they are

> authentic, they sometimes have too serious an atmosphere. I am making videos to eradicate fraud, but if the contents are too heavy, complicated or upsetting, it is hard to engage the audience till the end. (135)

Korekore (2023), a YouTuber who would not identify himself as a vigilante YouTuber but is famous for exposing various wrongdoings, is more open about the fact that his videos are essentially for entertainment purposes.

> I get upset and angry with the exposed wrongdoings. I seriously think criminals should be arrested, and I say it aloud, but my goal is not to crush the evil or enact justice. [My video is] essentially entertainment, featuring listening to and solving the audience's troubles. (251)

Their justice is affected by the consideration of effectiveness in attracting viewers. For example, Neo stated:

> The more influential I become and the more people watch my YouTube, the more tip-offs I get. [. . .] For example, my videos cannot deal with crimes like romance fraud that starts and concludes online. [. . .] I want to deal with as many such crimes as possible, but video editing requires costs and time.

The likelihood of maximum views also influences the timing of video publishing. 2024), for example, sometimes posts his videos exposing MLM when the police arrest those operating the scheme and the mass media reports it (87–89).

Despite the tension between their justice-driven aspirations and their need to engage their audiences as successful YouTubers, they do not cause internal moral dilemmas. Sigma openly discloses his ambitions, displaying highly neoliberal characteristics of commodified self-subjects by redefining legitimacy while motivated by monetary incentives. Sigma notes,

> We all want social significance, essentially by eradicating crimes or nuisances, and we thoroughly agree on this. This stays on top of our priorities, but we also want to improve our lives. We want to be able to afford a nice house, car, [. . .] go to a nice restaurant, something like that. [. . .] We have desires to be socially recognised and approved. Even these goals are identical among the members.

Behind this is the motivation to equalise their self-realisation, monetary gains and societal good. Sigma states, 'I want to be big together [with other Avengers]. Money will follow. We do everything that we think is interesting, what makes others happy, what serves society, what is meaningful, and the rest follows'. Alternatively, Neo comments, 'If I become successful, [my warning] will be more convincing [. . .] I hope I can be influential enough that my single word will make the viewers cautious [of frauds]'. Although the assumed balance between success and social good differs among Avengers, their underlying drive, constituting a symbiotic relationship between financial and social success and justice, is notable. This is particularly relevant amid the rising trend of social entrepreneurship, which pursues social justice within the neoliberalist framework (Oberoi et al., 2022) and the mainstreaming of celebrity institutional entrepreneurs (Hopkinson & Cronin, 2015). The 'neoliberal order' is also present within the YouTuber ecosystem, as Mojo describes the difficulty of finding a successor for his role who is equally 'knowledgeable in crimes, able to articulate rationally in front of a camera, perform skilfully, and is attractive on camera'. Moreover, as Sigma's above remarks suggest, they openly display their attainment of emotional rewards, whether derived from these men's beliefs that they

serve society, obtain recognition, or secure masculine selves. This may be contextualised within broader YouTube culture, which promotes a YouTuber's way of life, exhorting 'Live on what you like [*sukina koto de, ikiteiku*]" (YouTube Japan n. d.).

Material incentives are undeniably a critical motivational factor in their digital vigilante ventures. However, vigilante activities also contribute to their need to gain (perceived) legitimacy in neoliberal Japan, representing a coping mechanism for the paradoxical intersection of powerful social pressure and expectations attached to the 'conventional' gender roles and entrepreneurial self-responsibility. Vigilante YouTubers in this study could be considered 'innovators' according to Robert Merton's (1938) classic typology, in that they try to achieve what salarymen are imagined as possessing – a sense of belonging, social recognition, money, a masculine self – via non-salarymen methods due to their perceived lack of access to the salaryman's way of life.

Another critical characteristic in YouTube's economy is the consumable quality of vigilantes' narratives. 'Recovered' victims or 'rehabilitated' ex-perpetrators motivated by the desire to atone for past crimes *and* anger towards those who victimised them are attractive underlying premises that instinctively appeal to YouTube audiences. In this sense, YouTube is a domain in which marginality can be transformed into 'a unique quality' that is highly valued. Meanwhile, members of Tokyo Avengers imagine the ephemerality of their 'careers' on YouTube. Interestingly, Sigma and Neo considered the extension of their current vigilante activities to lie in 'becoming politicians in the future'. Vigilante Youtubers regard the Japanese political realm – often considered highly corrupt (Carlson & Reed, 2018) – as parallel to their sphere of vigilante activities fuelled by their familiarity – criminality and marginality – just with greater legitimacy and power.

Discussion and conclusion: (yielding power from) criminality, marginality, and vulnerability

This study explored vigilante YouTubers in a contemporary Japanese context by examining notions of power, masculinity, and the surveillant gaze. As analysed above, the study revealed a novel insight into the conceptualisation of vigilante YouTubers as an occupation and how individual vigilantes craft their images and use social media platforms to satisfy multiple goals with a great deal of entrepreneurship. Vigilantes in the present study operate within the neoliberal ecosystem of public approval, marketability, and popularity while securing a sense of belonging and meaning. The public CJS, conventional legitimacy, and moral judgement are positioned as secondary to public reactions and numerical evaluations. We identify the public gaze as one of the most persuasive tools used by Japanese vigilante YouTubers to gain power while aligned with a neoliberal rationale.

Vigilantes' narratives suggest that their low self-esteem resulted from their embodied marginality. By engaging in YouTuber activities, they try to yield power in Japan's perceived dominance of salaryman masculinity. In this regard, social media accentuating the public's reactions is indispensable to satisfying their desire for approval. Moreover, as repeated by the vigilante YouTubers, ideas such as 'being useful to society', 'social significance', and 'contributing to society' give them a strong sense of accomplishment. Therefore, Foucault's technologies of the self as a concept proves to be highly relevant to this study. The creative application of digital vigilantism is a means to realise self-

transformation (see Foucault, 1988, p. 19). Despite the legitimisation of their marginality and 'uniqueness', they cultivate power with highly creative means. This does not mean that they are trying to overturn the hegemonic form of masculinity. Their unique features confine them to the grey zone of criminality, marginality, and vulnerability – in fact, they depend on these characteristics as they yearn for *ibasho* (H. Tanaka, 2021).

The vigilante YouTuber's career is one in which an adversarial background is not considered (by the audience or the YouTubers themselves) disadvantageous but a source of social legitimacy. Considering YouTube vigilantism as a technology of the self begs reconceptualisation of the role of digital vigilantism, which has hitherto been regarded as a tool for naming and shaming (e.g. Loveluck, 2020) to compensate for the security deficit, and that of technology therein. While some vigilantes criticised law enforcement, others felt that their services supported police work and appreciated the recognition from police officers. 'Salaryman' police officers, constrained by organisational limitations in addressing all crimes, serve as an indispensable instrument for vigilantes to construct an image of a liberated neoliberal entrepreneurial security provider capable of responding to public (or customer) demands, thereby purportedly delivering a more 'authentic' form of justice. In their attempt to establish a legitimate identity in Japanese society, YouTube is more than a tool for raising awareness of crime and deviance.

Among YouTube vigilantism's key features is its 'entertainment' factor (cf. Korekore, 2023). The YouTubers' objective is to maximise views and followers, which automatically shapes their content as the audience and platform providers judge it. Vigilante YouTubers rely on their viewers and audiences, in part, to heroise them. However, such acts of digital vigilantism nonetheless impact public denunciation of certain events, phenomena, or organisations (e.g. Yasuda & Ogawa, 2023; cf.; Trottier, 2019).

The fear that they will lose their 'space' for their image projection and identity performance as dependable heroes appears more substantial than the fear and risk of arrest. Within this ecosystem, legitimacy and justice are evaluated according to their own measurement of public approval. The notion of a 'success story' is bidirectional: the success of vigilante YouTubers' heroic acts that expose wrongdoings or provide a 'conclusion' in the form of evildoers' arrests by the authorities are highly valued; meanwhile, stories of the marginal who used to be in trouble taking revenge against the norm or the mainstream appeal to the general public. The (perceived) power acquisition (cf. Foucault, 1977) that they achieved through digital gaze vis-à-vis established power gave them a sense of identity, dignity, and purpose. (Pseudo-) democratisation of communications allows a 'bottom-up democratic model of communications' (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008 in Hamilton & Heflin, 2011, p. 1053).

The preference for a non-'salaryman' approach to justice and the significant motivation derived from the number of views their videos receive does not necessarily imply that vigilante YouTubers frequently engage in illegal arrests. In fact, interviewees described how they maintain active communication with police officers and seek advice to ensure the legality of their activities. This effort is largely aimed at avoiding account bans on YouTube. However, this does not mean that YouTube's governance effectively prevents misconduct. This was starkly demonstrated in 2023 by a series of incidents involving vigilante YouTubers who overstepped boundaries. In one case, a person was wrongfully accused of scalping, while another group incited an individual to transport drugs (M. Shimbun, 2024). Whether the police intend to formalise their relationship with the vigilantes into official cooperation or prefer to maintain an ad hoc alliance-one that activates only when they successfully and

legally apprehend targets – it is crucial to instil the guiding principles of modern policing, such as the principle of due process. Ensuring that their activities align with these principles is vital to maintaining accountability and legality in their actions.

Inscribing their activities in the form of diaries and memoirs (Funaim, 2023; 2024), videos, tweets, and YouTube performances itself manifests Foucault's technologies of the self through acts of self-cultivation in the form of digital curatorial practices, as pointed out by Weisgerber and Butler (2016, p. 1340). Meanwhile, as Messerschmidt (2014) situational action theory argues, vigilante YouTubers construct their identities with reference to the relevant norms in their living environment with some features of the desired identities mirroring those of 'salarymen' – earning, *ikigai*, masculine dignity and patriarchal authority. This suggests the 'bulimic' (Young, 2007, p. 32) nature of the masculine norm in Japanese society, which is internalised by those structurally excluded by such an ideal way of life.

This study has several limitations that future research should address. First, it will be necessary to investigate the motivations of those who consume the vigilantes' YouTube channels to more fully understand why such actors have emerged. Second, while the vigilante YouTubers' interviews and writings reveal complex interactions between the meaning-making of their activities and the social norms, participatory observation of their activities will clarify the practicalities of their activities, including how they determine their targets. Third, the destabilised notion of hegemonic 'salaryman' masculinity requires further analysis. Whether vigilante YouTubers' motivations remain the same among the upcoming generations remains to be seen. Finally, future research should explore how the global proliferation of neoliberalism and the rise of the attention economy shape digital vigilante cultures in other contexts and how they interact with the local politics of gender and security to elucidate individuals' diverse motivations for joining digital vigilantism and their relationships with the public police.

Note

1. Some respondents apply the group's name that implies a league of vigilantes, however due to the monetisation scheme of YouTube and the resulting entrepreneur culture, the present paper uses 'vigilante YouTuber' instead of digital vigilante. It is necessary to acknowledge that some 'vigilante YouTubers' do not identify their activities as vigilantism. This is due to the inherent contradictions of their activities torn between the orientation towards entertainment/profit-making ventures and realisation of justice, and some identify more with the former than the latter. As will be detailed in the paper, even those who identify themselves as vigilantes admit that their justice is not universal. Still, in this paper, we regard them as a form of digital vigilantism due to the similarity in the outlook of their activities.

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