

Commercial connections: the affective labour of creating social atmosphere at maid cafes in the Akihabara neighbourhood of Tokyo, Japan

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Abstract

The Aim of this thesis was to answer the research question “what are the actors that create an social atmosphere and how do these actors collectively form and maintain the affective atmosphere at maid cafes”. This was done by explaining the modern life in japan with *muen shakai*, and the collapse of the traditional family structure. This was then put in connection to an explanation of previous research on maid cafes. The data was collected through ethnographic research using participant observation. The data was collected from two maid cafes in the Akihabara, Tokyo, Japan. data was also collected from Instagram posts from the maids and the cafes. The theoretical framework was Affect, affective labour and atmosphere. In the analysis it was determined that the actors who played a main role in creating atmosphere were Maids, consumer goods, and space. These were able to create a social atmosphere by interconnectedly interacting and affective the body of the guest. The maids through conversations and rituals, the items by engaging the maids to give affective response or the guests. And the space by being used to contain the atmosphere within the space allowing the maid cafe’s atmosphere to uninterruptedly affect the guests.

Key words: Maid cafe’s, Affect, Affective labour, atmosphere, Japan, ethnography, participant observation, auto- ethnographic

Acknowledgement

Writing this thesis was a very difficult process for me, due to delays caused by illness, and the subsequent stress coming with trying to catch up with the time lost. As such I would like to thank all the supportive people in my life that has helped me get this thesis done.

Firstly I would like to thank my supervisor Paulina Kolata for helping me unravel the idea I had for this thesis into something interesting and tangible. As well as providing valuable feedback on it into the last minute. Without this support I do not think I would have finished it.

I would also like to thank the very helpful and kind staff at Waseda University. Who provided me with valuable resources and assistance with my fieldwork in Japan. I would also like to specifically thank my supervisor at Waseda Rhee Maji. For her guidance and wisdom during the early stages of the thesis process. As well as for her ability to always show support and genuine curiosity for my thesis and interests in it.

I also want to thank Lisa and Maaike who joined me at the special program at Waseda. For all the great discussion about our thesis works and for the moments we explored Tokyo together during our time at Waseda.

I also like to thank the staff at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies for their support, understanding, and willingness to accompany my special needs when it came to my essay writing over the years.

I would also like to thank my friend Apollonia for staying up late and helping me check for spelling mistakes and comments on the content of my writing. As well as my friend Jamie for always being able to make me laugh even in the toughest times. I also want to thank all my other close friends I have made along the way in my life.

Lastly, I like to thank the support of my family who supported me through out the whole thesis writing process.

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Conventions

This paper uses Japanese names in order of family name then given name. Japanese words are italicized and transcribed into Latin alphabet using the modified Hepburn system. English translation is followed in brackets when not explained in text.

Introduction

Cute young women, bright pink, live singing and dancing, all served on plate with *omuraisu* (Japanese omelette dish) personally decorated for you with ketchup by a maid. All found in the bright light of the Akihabara neighbourhood in Tokyo. Here, customers can go to enjoy themselves for an hour at the many kinds of themed cafes, such as maid cafes. Two of the famous and commonly found all over Akihabara, as well as Japan, are “At-home (also written @home)”, and “Maidreaming”. At these establishments, the patrons can indulge themselves in cuteness: drinks, foods, and desserts. Served to you by waitresses that are often young women dressed in maid outfits inspired by the Victorian era. These maids will engage in conversation with the patron sporadically when serving them throughout their stay at the cafe, as well as offer them to take photos with them that they will personally decorate. Many of the customers become fans and followers of specific maids, forming bonds that blur the line between customer and friend.

While this part of Japan is in full bloom, one can also read on the news of people committing suicide over the burden of caring for their elderly parents (Allison, 2013, p.40). More and more of the elderly are afraid of dying alone (Suzuki et al., 2021, pp. 679–680). Young people are struggling more and more with forming meaningful connections to one another and finding romantic partners, as Japan's low birth rate causes a more rapid decline in the population (Yuliani, 2020, p.2). The old traditional family ideal of a salaryman breadwinner husband and a stay-at-home mom raising the children has fallen apart since the housing bubble busted in the 90's and the so called the lost decade started (Richard & Allison, 2011, pp.8–9). People are looking for new and alternative ways to connect and form relationships beyond the norm. Commercial cafes like maid cafes have been popping up since 2004 and serve customers not only drinks, but also companionship and nonsexual intimacy for a price. These Cafe's Created their own idols that customers can charge extra to take a photo with, leaning in more or less into the sexualization of the working maids (Galbraith, 2019, pp.222–226). Here, customers can come to the cafe alone and still feel socially connected and engaged. Where the maids only

speak to you for a little bit, and in between most sit on their phone waiting for the maids to come back to them or announce their turn to take a photo, thus creating an atmosphere that manages to both isolate customers from one another but also connect them to the store's maid waitresses. Maid cafes stem from the *Shōjo* (for women) and *Bishōjo* (cute girl) manga movement (Galbraith, 2019, p.207). In the 70-80s men who found themselves enjoying *shōjo* manga (for girls manga) and *bishōjo* (cute girl) characters were seen as failed men because they did not engage in traditional male activities. At the same time these men looked for alternative to the masculine ideal of the salaryman at that time (Galbraith, 2019, pp.22–24).

Because young people are more and more often occupying the insecure labour market with part-time jobs and temporary work. Most temporary and part-time workers are women, but increasingly so are young and old men too (Macnaughtan, 2015, p.8). As a result, there is a prevailing identity crisis in Japan, caused by the precarity of work, where traditional association coming from work life are unavailable to the young, who are left to fend for themselves (Allison, 2013, p.65). Galbraith 2019 suggests that maid cafes are a form of social network and support that has been created since the start of the lost decade (Galbraith, 2013, p.105). The reason then why maid cafes are important to look at is because they are on the intersection of the struggle for identity and finding social connections.

This master thesis will explore the actors involved in forming the atmosphere at maid cafes, which allows them to be successful commercial social spaces in Japan. In order to do so, this thesis asks the question of “what are the actors that create an social atmosphere and how do these actors collectively form and maintain the affective atmosphere at maid cafes”. Affective atmosphere here is viewed as a body of itself that is able to affect and be affected by other bodies acting within and outside its own spaces. However, this will be further elaborated on in the theoretical framework. Much of the literature on affective labour in Japan has been focused on either the workers or the customers (Allison, 1994; Fanasca, 2019a, 2019b; Koch, 2020). However, the atmosphere of these spaces has not been explored. As such, this thesis will fill this academic gap and explore the creation of atmosphere at maid cafes.

This thesis will start by giving a literature review over the social decline in Japan often referred to as *Muenshakai* (relationless society). Then, the literature on maid cafes, as commercial services and establishments that offer social interaction and intimacy as part of their business will be looked at. Following this, *kawaii* culture and how it is associated with maid cafes through the *bishōjo* and *shōjo* manga will be explored. Before going over the theoretical

framework used in this thesis. This part will discuss affect, affective labour and atmosphere. Then, the methodology of the research process will be shown. Data was collected onsite from the maid cafes: “At home cafe” and “Maidreaming”. At-site location data was collected through participant observation and fieldnotes. These notes were coded using thematic analysis, then further analysed using content analysis. From this the three actors involved in creation of atmosphere at maid cafes were explained as Maids, consumer goods, and space. Consumer goods meaning the items and associated services used with the items within the cafe in order to create the desired atmosphere. After this, the ethical concerns of the research process and the limitation of the thesis is discussed. Subsequently, the analysis and discussion of the data will be presented. Here, the main argument is that the maids are one of the active bodies creating affective atmospheres at maid cafes. This is done through interactions, such as rituals and conversation with the guests. After this, the material goods or commercial goods and services will be analysed as a body that can affect others and help create and maintain atmosphere. Here, the physical items bought at the cafes, such as polaroids and drinks, are discussed as facilitators of interaction between the maid and the guest, as well as as collectible mementos (as in the case of the polaroids) that the guests can bring home and remember the times at the cafe. Lastly, the space of the cafe itself is discussed and how it is used to create and bring people into the atmosphere. This is then concluded, and the research question is answered.

Literature review

This section will first look at *Muen shakai* (reactionless society) before then looking at the traditional family. This is then followed by a look at previous research on maid cafes, their role as part of an affective economy their connection to kawaii culture, origins from games, and the struggle for identity is looked at.

Isolation and loneliness

Muen shakai means “relationless society” and is a term that started to emerge in 2009 in use by the Japanese news broadcast NHK and was used as a collective term for the different types of social isolation issues that has since started to gain more light in Japan (Taylor, 2012, p.1;

Yuliani, 2020, p.1). *Muen shakai* represent a societal shift from community to family to individuality. According to Yuliani (2020) the first shift from community to family came after the loss in WW2, when Japan was rebuilding its country the shift towards industry meant large rural to urban migration. This migration meant that people went away from their rural communities and moved into cities where the close family became the core social structure. This went on until the lost decade, when people started moving away from close blood relations and losing contact with friends shifting into the more socially isolated situation that many Japanese find themselves in today (Yuliani, 2020, p.2). This change was highlighted in the 2010s with reports of *muen shi* (solitary deaths), where people died without anyone noticing until much later. These individuals had no family to be contacted to take care of the remains and left possessions, leaving the government to pay for the cleaning and interring of the person's ashes at Buddhist temples (Taylor, 2012, p.1). Thus, Japan is experiencing *Muen shakai* (no-relationship society), a term used to explain the many social isolations issues japan is experiencing (Taylor, 2012, p.1). Between 2005 to 2010, single households went from 29.5% to 31.2%, with an expected increase to 37.4% by 2030 (Taylor, 2012, p.3), meaning that more and more people are finding themselves living alone, moving away from core family-oriented society to a more isolated and alone one. Further burdens of this are placed on women, who are expected to care for the elderly in their family, in addition to their own family if they have one. Similarly, women might struggle to find partners due to Japan's economic and corporate system that expects women to earn a living for themselves while also not putting any value on their work. This may cause restrictions on equality in their partnerships (Nakano, 2011, p.146). In 2005, in Tokyo, 44% of women between ages 30-34 were single; nationally, it was 33% (Nakano, 2011, p.131). By 2015, unmarried people over 50 in Tokyo numbered 19.2% for women and 26% for men (Kottmann, 2022, p.1166).

What both the fall of the core family structure, *muen shakai*, and the rise of insecure employment shows is the rising precarity of life in Japan. Precarity is the experience of living in insecurity, often related to the collapse of social ties and identities, in addition to more traditional forms of reciprocities and relances (Cruz-Del Rosario & Rigg, 2019, p.517). Scholars like Standing (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) argue that precarity is caused by the state withdrawing its support and promotion in areas of social protection, preservation of entitlement, and the building of social belonging among its citizens (as cited in Cruz-Del Rosario & Rigg, 2019, p.518). Socially, it means that people in Japan struggle to find a space to belong. Allisone (2013) highlights what one Freeter named Amamiya described to them as *ikizurasa* (hardship

of life) of work and poverty. The highlight here is that of human connection. Amamiya explained that companies in Japan provide affiliation that gives regular workers access to support in hard times, increasing salary, and identity. On the other hand, irregular workers are left out of this, and have to fend for themselves, making them bereaved of a place of security, homeness (*ibasho*) and a sense of belonging (Allison, 2013, p.65), meaning that according to Amamiya, to some irregular work causes distress and worry that becomes a question of identity. This question of identity and belonging is a general theme throughout the change in family structure, *muen shakai*, and precarity going on in Japan. It is in this context that the maid cafes exist in Japan. As discussed in the next section, maid cafes are commercial spaces that sell social interaction, commercial goods, the space and its atmosphere to their patrons for a fee. In a time of constant reimaginings of identity, maid cafes provide just that. According to Galbraith (2013) maid cafes are examples of support networks have been formed since the economic bubble burst in the 90s, as well as the fall of family and work groups since the 1990s (Galbraith, 2013, p.105).

The Traditional family

In the post-war period, Japan went through a rapid economic boom. In this period, the ideals of masculinity and femininity revolved around the roles in the nuclear family. In it, men were supposed to be the breadwinner, working at a full-time job with life-long job security as the so-called “salarymen”, while women were supposed to be at home, taking care of the children and the household (Allison, 2013, pp.21–22; Kottmann, 2022, p.1165). Becoming a salaryman was by far not something every man could become. However, it was the dominant form of masculinity in post-war Japan (Hidake, 2011, p.112). According to Fanasca (2019), the salarymen were the pillars of society who, through their unrelenting dedication to work and company, held up society and the family (Fanasca, 2019b, p.18). This put men then at the center of the patriarchal society.

However, this would not last, as the core family household of breadwinner husband and stay-at-home housewife started to decrease in number from the 70s. Until 2005, the number of married relationships decreased by a third, and the number of multigenerational stem-families halved (Richard & Allison, 2011, p.8). Mean while the traditional family is still something that is the dominant ideal which causes a lot of pressure on young people in Japan; however, since

the lost decade, full time employment has decreased. Comparing 1984 and 2012, in 1984 men had 93.4% full-time employment rate and women had 78.4%. But in 2012, men had a full-time employment rate of 77.9% and women had 42.5% (Dalton, 2017, p.100). Full time employment has instead been replaced by part-time work. Part-time work and other non-regular work were in 2013/2014 dominated by women, who stood for 58.1%, while men stood for 24.7%. among men younger and older generations are shown to be the larger part of non-regular workers (Macnaughtan, 2015, p.8). Koch (2020) writes that insecure labour (for example, part time work) is not only the domain of women in Japan, but increasingly, the young are a part of it (p.9). this is described by Anna Allison (2013) as “a sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected,”(as quoted in Koch, 2020, p.9). Koch quotes Briton (2011) who says that peripheralization of young people in Japan is causing labour to become more divided between core jobs and non-core jobs (as cited in Koch, 2020, p.9). Koch (2020) adds further that the changing job market for young people has a major social impact on Japan as a whole - impacting marriage, childbirth rate, and causing the ongoing discourse on social insecurity, alienation, and isolation. In which young people were made to start reconsidering the meaning of work (Koch, 2020, p.9). For example, most women might only date part-time employees or freeters¹ but never marry them, limiting their ability to form families (Cook, 2013, p.31), since in Japan childbirth outside of marriage is still very rare. In 2004, 2% of child births occurred outside of marriage, and in 2021, only 3% of childbirth occurred out of marriage (Nakano, 2011, p.131; White, 2021, p.593). In addition to this, freeters received scrutiny and criticism for not being full adults, as well as the questioning of their manhood and masculinity (Cook, 2013, p.33) - sentiments similar to the views on otakus and male shōjo readers. This will be discussed in the maid cafe section of the literature review. Furthermore, this change in employment and changing family structure is one of the reasons why the *term Muen shakai* is often relevant when talking about Japan today.

Maid Cafes

Maid cafes are spaces where customers can go and enjoy themselves while being entertained by waitresses called maids (*meido*). At maid cafes, maids will serve food and drinks, take photos with customers for a fee, and engage in conversation with their customers. Galbraith (Galbraith, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2019) has written extensively on otaku culture and specifically

¹ People (excluding students and housewife) between the ages 15-35 who object to Japanese corporate culture and are unemployed or work part-time jobs (Cook, 2013, p.29,31)

on maid cafes. According to Galbraith (2019), the main source of revenue at these cafes, despite tourism and media attention, is regular customers that come to these cafes regularly to interact and have a good time with the maids that make them want to come back (p.188). Galbraith (2019) argues then that maid cafes are a part of something larger, described by Henry Jenkins as affective economics (Galbraith, 2019, pp.188–189). Jenkins (2006) describes affective economics as the “building, developing, and maintaining relationships to shape desires and affect purchasing decisions” (as cited in Galbraith, 2019, p.189). Galbraith goes further and with Akiko Takeyama’s (2010) writing on affective economics who describes the relationships formed through it as being complex and being able to satisfy its actors and institutions on different levels, both mutually and asymmetrically (as cited in Galbraith, 2019, p.189). Affective economy is then the process of forming relations with customers to manipulate and guide their purchasing. This is done both to the mutual benefit of the actors and customers, but also in ways that benefit one over the other. It is this complexity that makes Galbraith argue that affective economies require a nuanced approach (Galbraith, 2019, p.189). To this end, affective labour is worth looking into in relation to maid cafes. It will be discussed further in theoretical framework but, in short, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (1999,1999,2004) describe it as “[l]abor that produces or manipulates affects”. However, they also underline that it is also the foundation of communities and a shared subjectivity (as cited and quoted in Galbraith, 2019, p.189). Maid cafes are then at the crossroads of all this. They are a space where community and relationships are formed in order to maintain a steady flow of regular customers, who are, through their relationship, incentivised to spend more money at their cafes and merchandise. But by doing this, relationships and connections are also formed, creating bonds that are both real and one-sided at the same time.

Galbraith (2019) quoting the Legendary maid Hitomi, who has worked at “At home” since 2004 when it was opened, has written: “explains cafés as “*moe* space”: “It’s like, the inside of your heart is pink. . . . When your heart is a bright, warm color, maybe that feeling is *moe*”” (as quoted in Galbraith, 2019, p.190). *Moe* means according to Galbraith (2019) that Moe is an affective response to a fictional character. Fictional characters is a body that is able to affect human bodies that are interacting with it (Galbraith, 2019, pp.80–81). Ribero (2021) says that *Moe* is the viewer's response to the *Kawaii* astatic. According to them it is the targeted desire, affection, lust towards a character (Ribeiro, 2021, p.7). *Kawaii* means cute, and *kawaii* culture is a celebration of all things being innocent, vulnerable, sweet, adorable. This style rejects maturity in preference of innocence combined with acting stupid, dependent, and weak

(Ribeiro, 2021, p.4). *Kawaii* culture is most often associated with Japanese manga, anime and shōjo (girl) culture (Tran, 2018, p.19). Shōjo manga is manga made for women. However, *shōjo* and its *bishōjo* characters (cute characters) were written by both men and women and would also be targeted at men (Galbraith, 2019, p.44). Since the rise in popularity of shōjo manga among men in the 70s to the 80s, there has also been eroticisation of cute characters in *shōjo* manga (Galbraith, 2019, pp.20–21). Galbraith (2019) talks about how many associate male *shōjo* fans with Lolita complexes, the idea being that it is just men being attracted to underaged girls (as per the meaning of Lolita complex or lolicon), and men’s sexual abuse and objectification of girls (p21). However, Galbraith speaks against this assumption, pointing towards manga editors and critics of the time arguing that lolicon had more to do with loving cute things or attraction to cuteness and girl things. This cute movement was less so attracted to real girls, but rather towards the cute girl characters (Galbraith, 2019, p.21). However, the core of this movement at the time was men trying to find alternatives toward traditional masculinity. Galbraith (2019) referring to Itō Kimio’s work in which he talks about how Ito struggled with his masculinity when he was in university in the 70s and from that found himself reading shōjo manga as he became more uncomfortable with his own masculinity. Ito, despite not identifying as gay, had found himself reading boys love (bl) manga, which gave an alternative to the dominant view of masculinity at the time. Similarly, Ito had reported that other men reading shōjo stories that were “girly stories about romance and everyday life” also found their escape and alternative to the ideals of masculinity. Ito explained it later that the people turning to shōjo manga was, by and large, a movement towards girls’ culture and cuteness (Galbraith, 2019, pp.22–24). It should be noted, however, that the shōjo manga movement was made by mostly women at the start, and over time men joined, until it became a joined effort of creating *bishōjo* (cute girl), shōjo manga (Galbraith, 2015, p.21,25). It is this culture of appreciation towards fictional cute girls that maid cafes stem from (Galbraith, 2019, p.207)

In response to the rising number of male shōjo manga fans, a columnist in the magazine *manga burikko*, Nakamori Akio, started to criticise male fans of *shōjo* manga in 1983. Nakamori collected the male fans of shōjo manga in to them to the term *otaku* (generally associated with fans of anime and manga), who he explained as men who desired fictional girl characters. Nakamori goes on to describe *otakus* as failed men who could not get women, were women, or attributed them to being queer or homosexual, and cross-dressers (Galbraith, 2015, p.27). In a modern setting, this stigma around *otakus* exists, but they are more generally viewed as

people who are fans of anime, manga, and video games. Otakus are viewed as people who have failed to fulfill their duty to be responsible and productive adults, by overindulging in consumption beyond the societal norm of social common sense (Galbraith, 2013, p.105). Again, you get a group of people who are crossing boundaries of what societal norms expect of them. Male otakus are viewed as failed men who go against ideals of masculinity, in which they are expected to play and consume gender appropriately and in ways that do not prevent them from engaging in relationships with women. Galbraith thus argues that this view of failed men applies to men who visit maid cafes regularly (Galbraith, 2013, p.106). This notion of failed men is in many ways similar to the questioning of freeters' masculinity, because they did not want to follow the expected career path in Japan. It also shows the backlash targeted towards otakus, echoing the same backlash *bishōjo* otaku fans faced.

Among the visitors of maid cafes, there is a big overlap between them and otakus (Galbraith, 2013, p.105). As discussed earlier, maid cafes are *moe* spaces, which are heavily associated with cute culture and the affectionate response to cute girls. But as shown earlier, one of the characteristics of modern Japan is the search for social belonging and spaces to be at home at. It is rooted in the want to break away from traditional masculinity and a want to find something new and alternative to the expected norm of being a breadwinner or housewife. To many regulars this is what maid cafes provide. However, there are layers to the relationships at maid cafes as they blur the line between real life and fiction. On this, Galbraith (2019) writes that maid cafes are places where customers interact with fictional characters portrayed and brought to life by the maid waitresses. The maids create and adopt their own two-dimensional character that merges with the three-dimensional world and is adopted when talking and interacting with the customers. This is what makes maid cafes stand out, the merger of two and three dimensions. According to Galbraith, what maid cafes do is that they encourage us to think beyond dimensions of both real and fictional bodies (Galbraith, 2019, p.190). When looking at the bodies that are upholding affective atmospheres at maid cafes, what you find is that maid cafes are places that function in layers of trying to encourage guests to spend money, while also forming relationships with them in order to have them come back to spend more money regularly, walking the line of satisfying the needs and wants of the customer but also manipulating them through affective labour in order to make them spend money at your cafe. At the same time, the relationship formed and wanted is on a blurred line between the real person taking up the disguise of a fictional character expected to respond and react to the customer in predictable ways. Galbraith (2019) shows that interactions with maids can become

a strong routine in which some guests start to describe it as a game, where the more time and money they spend at maid cafes interacting with maids, the more recognition and interaction they get from the maids (Galbraith, 2019, p.197). This notion is unsurprising as maid cafes came from bishōjo games that came out in the late 90s early 20s. It was a pop-up cafe in 1998 which was themed after the bishōjo game “Welcome to Pia Carrot!! 2”, that was the first maid cafe (Galbraith, 2019, p.209). This then implies a gamification of interactions at maid cafes, which adds then a layer whereas the cafe serves as a predictable game, in which the guest can predict the outcome of their actions. Furthermore, the notion of a space of belonging is also a layered part of maid cafe. For instance, one of the guests called Dargon, that Galbraith (2019) talked with, expressed to him that the cafe he was a regular at was more than just a cafe to him. This dragon said: “This isn’t just a place I eat. It’s a place I belong. That’s why I always come back here. I don’t go to other cafés. This is where I want to spend my time.”, expressing a sense of belonging and identity with the cafe as a space where they can be (as quoted in Galbraith, 2019, p.202), reminding of the term *ibasho* expressed by Amamiya. However, Galbraith adds further here that the real reason this guest wanted to be there so much, was that they wanted to meet their favorite maid Ringo (Galbraith, 2019, p.202). Dragon here talks as if it is the space (the maid cafe) that he belongs to. But Galbraith points toward a deeper meaning to it by pointing out Dragon’s desire to see the maid Ringo might be his true desire.

Most of Galbraith’s studies on maid cafes has been on the customers and maids (Galbraith, 2011, 2013, 2019), focusing on the interactions between guests and maids and the views and reality of the people visiting these spaces. Galbraith (2019) argues that they are spaces that allow the creation of affective relation that is centred around creating shared constructed realities (p.224). These formed relations are not exclusive but rather open and spread out to different groups both human and nonhuman (p.225). The social interaction of regulars at maid cafes with both the fictional and real, should, according to Galbraith, be seen as an alternative form of sociality as compared to the normal expectations (p.225). The general theme, in Galbraith conclusion, is that of shared realities (fictional and real), shared relationships, against a struggle of belonging and can be summed up by Galbraith writing: “The struggle for imagination, to imagine and create alternative ways of seeing and being in the world, is a shared one” (Galbraith, 2019, p.225). This is what this thesis is going to explore further, by exploring the shared creation of affective atmospheres at maid cafes in Japan, in order to further expand research into these spaces and how they form their own community and a space of belonging, both as an establishment in affective economy formed to capitalize on people’s ability to

connect to the atmosphere of the space, but also as a collective endeavour to find a space of belonging. Focusing on the atmosphere allows further insight into the creation of social spaces between affective labour and affected bodies, as well as into the affective atmosphere of that space.

Theoretical framework

Affect

Affect is part of a conceptual field consisting of affect, emotions, and feelings. Affect is the uncategorised relational dynamics; feelings are the subjective experience of affective relations, while emotion is the categorised and processed version of the experience (Jan Slaby & Christian von Scheve, 2019, p.43). Kolehmainen & Mäkinen points out that “[a]ffect cannot be reduced to subjective feelings; instead, it offers a means to explore relations between bodies, as it foregrounds bodies’ capacities to affect and be affected” (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.449). Meaning that affect is the sensation in the body in the moment of an experience, while emotions is the processed feelings into emotional categories (example: Sad) after the experience has past. Affect is the change or variation created within a body as a response to interaction with another body. But in practice, it is more often one body moving another body (Galbraith, 2019, p.80). Bodies do not have to be real as they can be both fictional and virtual in addition to real life one. As discussed in the *moe* section in the literature review, fictional characters are bodies that are able to move bodies interacting with them (Galbraith, 2019, pp.80–81). In essence affect is what is sold at cafes. It is what is felt when entering the maid cafe and being in the maid cafe space, it is felt when interacting with the maids, it is the sensation of looking at the photo of a guest and their chosen maid. it’s the sensation felt when watching the maid delicately personalizing the photo in front of the guest.. It is also what maids will actively engage with the customer to move their bodies in desired way to do this they use Affective labour.

Affective labour is performed through interacting with bodies. This interaction can be in real life or virtual. The product of affective labour are feelings of ease, excitement, or passion

(Fanasca, 2019, p. 151). It is classified as a form of immaterial labour. Immaterial labour creates the knowledge and cultural aspects of commodity's affected by it. The end product of immaterial labour is always something intangible, which is why it is called immaterial labour (Fanasca, 2019, p. 151). Affective labour is able to create social networks and communities of different kinds (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 293). Affective labour develops bonds between the provider and receiver of affective labour through repeating interactions and communications between the receiver and provider (Fanasca, 2019, p. 152). More clearly affective labour is the active effort to affect others. Through the use of affective labour, people are able to create social networks and communities. As such affective labour is a powerful tool that can help create reoccurring customers. As discussed earlier about maid cafes, it is a part of affective economies, where the goal is to create recurring customers through selling affect. As such to sell affect at maid cafes affective labour is used by maids who as bodies can affect customers to form lasting relationships and potentially create regular customers. For example, by always striking up conversations when serving the guests.

Atmosphere

Riedle (2019) explains that atmosphere is the feeling or mood that fundamentally is beyond a person's body and exists mainly in the situation that the bodies are established in (Riedel, 2019, p.84), as compared to affect which according to what Riedle says relates to how bodies relate to each other. Atmosphere, on the other hand, is not restrained to the feelings of an individual mind but rather exists between minds in a collective that is attached to, and a part of a situation. This means, according to Riedle (2019), that atmospheres are contagious and can command bodies in a situation (p.84). Riedle writes further that atmospheres are a medium that can not be reduced to a single thing or be attached to or removed from one body. Atmospheres, then, are not mental projections but have a material presence in this world (embodied processes of involvement) (Riedel, 2019, p.84). Atmosphere, then, is something shared and formed from many different sources, both animate objects and inanimate objects. As atmosphere can command bodies, it means that just like affective labour it can impact how people perceive and experience a situation. By performing affective labour, you can create and uphold an atmosphere. Kolehmainen & Mäkinen (2021) explain that atmospheres are something that is produced collectively, in which the borders between bodies are not always maintained. Furthermore, affective experiences can go beyond the individual bodies' emotional state. Thus, doing affective labour might not look like the individual is performing labour at all, and create

the feeling of being part of a shared event (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, pp.458–459). As Kolehmainen and Mäkinen (2021) discussed further, that affect can be transferable and not only a phenomenon felt in an individual body. Similarly, atmospheres are not only the outside forces imbuing passive bodies with feelings, but rather people have an active part in this (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.449). As such, this thesis will consider atmosphere as a body that is able to be affected and affect the bodies interacting within it. It is something that can be created and upheld by maids working within it to affect other bodies that find themselves attuning to the atmosphere. Kolehmainen and Mäkinen (2021) argue that affective labour is a key practice in creating atmosphere. This was, however, not an individual labour but rather a collective one. Atmospheres also need labour to be created and maintained. Kolehmainen & Mäkinen understand atmosphere as something dynamic that can be changed for social, political, and economic reasons (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.449). Stewart (2011) discusses atmosphere as a force field people found themselves in. It is not a static part of the backdrop, but rather a living and changing entity that can affect others and be affected itself. People can work to be a part of the atmosphere or try to move past it. The atmosphere itself helps shape how the experience of an event is felt, formed, and expressed (Stewart, 2011, p.452).

Creating and maintaining atmosphere is, as discussed by Kolehmainen & Mäkinen above, a collective effort that requires multiple actors to make and uphold. As such it is not only built from the affective labour of maids. It is also created from the materials, sounds, smells, and aesthetic that occupies the space with the maids. It is also with the communal work of the guests, that this space can be upheld. What is meant by this, is that for the guest to stay within the atmosphere, they also need to partake in maintaining it as well. Meaning then that guest need be engaged in the space in a way that makes them attune to the atmosphere. Because of this, creating and maintaining an atmosphere is a collective effort. However, maids working at the cafe must balance the invitation to customers to engage with the atmosphere, and the commercial interests of the cafe to sell services and goods in order to make a profit. It also means that the withdrawal of atmosphere behind monetary incentives can be used to manipulate customers to spend money in order to be able to attune to the atmosphere again.

Methodology

Design and aim

The aim of the research design was to answer the research question “what are the actors that create an affective atmosphere and how do these actors collectively form and maintain the affective atmosphere at maid cafes?”. To do so, this thesis employs a qualitative research design. Bryman (2016) writes that qualitative research uses an interpretivist assumption of the world, where it emphasises the social aspect of the world’s participants. It also takes a constructionist understanding of the world. A constructionist believes that social properties of this world are an outcome from interactions between humans and are not pre-existing as a natural phenomenon (Bryman, 2016, p.375). Furthermore, Ragin and Amoroso (2019) write that qualitative research is often done under the assumption that big generalizations of phenomena are misrepresentative, because they fail to show nuances and exceptions within the phenomenon (Ragin & Amoroso, 2019, p.2). This thesis is thus formed around qualitative research methods such as participatory observation, online data collection, and content analysis.

The ontological positionality of this thesis is a constructivist view of the world. Constructionist view that social phenomena and their meanings are created by social actors. These social actors are the ones that, through social interaction, both create and revise social phenomena. It hinges on the idea that the world is rather socially created by the researcher and there is no single definitive version of it (Bryman, 2016, p.29). Epistemologically, this thesis takes an interpretivist view on the knowledge produced. Interpretivism views that social reality is meaningful to humans thus, theirs and other actions are meaningful. This means that social scientists need to understand the subjective meaning behind human social actions. In other words, a researcher must infer their own interpretation of others’ interpretation of their social actions (Bryman, 2016, pp.26–27). The benefits of these approaches is that they allow for more nuanced and complex interpretations and understandings of a social phenomenon.

Emic and etic is the discussion of what sort of perspective the researcher is taking as they conduct their research. Emic is the perspective of the people experiencing something, while etic is the outsider perspective (Rath, 2023, p.29) Rath 2023 explains that the emic way of research hinges on the assumption that cultures are specific to a community, and they can be best understood from someone inside that community. This approach means that culture is contextualized within the group or community that is being observed. While the etic approach

hinges on the assumption that culture has universal aspects to it thus it can be observed from the outside of the community (Rath, 2023, p.30). As such, this thesis takes an etic approach to its research. This is because the researcher is not native to Japan and is not a regular at maid cafes. As such, this thesis is written from an outsider's perspective, meaning that some cultural context might be missed or misunderstood.

Data collection

The data for this thesis was collected during field work on location in Japan between January and March 2024. In addition to this, more data was collected online from the social network Instagram. The field work data on location was collected through participant observation at two maid cafes, namely, "At-home" in Akihabara and "Maidreaming's Akihabara the secret base Store". Additionally, some preliminary data was collected from both "Maidreaming" and "At-home locations" and two additional cafes to get a general impression of how maid cafes worked in Akihabara. Data at these locations was gathered through field notes taken during the visit and then refined afterwards after leaving the cafe. Items such as photos with the maids, photo collection books. were gathered from the locations as data. the physical data was then either scanned or photographed so that it could be analysed using the analysis program NVivo. Further data was collected online from Instagram. posts, reels and stories posted by individual maid's accounts and the Maidreaming secret base account was used for online data. This was done as a supplement to the field note data and to create a more holistic understanding on the formation of atmosphere in and outside of the Maid Cafe space. It also gave more insight to how maid cafes used their affective labour to influence people outside of the cafe. given that Affective labour can be done online to affect people as discussed in the theoretical framework. Then online media can also be used to influence people to buy photos and other commercial goods form the maids.

Field notes

To prepare for the visits, a list of what to make a note of was made before starting the on-site visits. The list was then refined and worked on reflectively, as new things of importance were noticed and experienced during the site visits. Examples of things of note listed were smells, music, gestures, clothing, interactions, the layout of the space, interior design, colours, rituals, reoccurring phrases (add to appendix). This was then noted down in a notebook as field notes. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) writes that field notes is the main way researchers collect data

during participatory observation, as it is the main way to record day to day occurrences, behaviours, informal interviews (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p.157). The initial notes taken were jolt notes, which are just the phrases, words and short notes written down during the participant observation used to aid in remembering what happened (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p.160). Furthermore, the note taking was done openly with the observed freely being allowed to come over and have a look at what was written down. This was often met with either ambivalence or curiosity. It was done in an effort to both help remember the spaces as they were being experienced, but to also allow full transparency of what I was doing and my role as a student researcher. However, writing in front of people might make them feel self-conscious or uncomfortable (Bryman, 2016, p.441; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p.163), which may have affected the results. As such, the notes were taken when not interacting with the maids, when they had left to interact with another customer or to let me enjoy a drink. This way the jolt note taking did not interfere with my interactions at the cafe. However, reflexively, it might have made some maids uncomfortable talking and interacting with me. However, as the data collection was not only about maids interaction with the researcher, this was not a big issue, as this led the researcher to focus on the space and its layout and what is contained within, in addition to maids' interaction with others.

More detailed field notes were written the same day as the site visits, directly after or after getting back to where I was living at the time to write down the notes in more detail. This is also the recommendation by Bryman when writing down the more detailed fieldwork notes (Bryman, 2016, p.444). The time spent on writing the more detailed notes was around an hour or more using the jolted notes as memory aids. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) wrote that the quality of the field notes relies on the level of detail and accuracy of description written down (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p.166), which is why after each site visit the same day an hour or more was spent writing up the jolted notes in to fully developed field notes. My aim with the note taking was to note down as much as possible, even the most mundane thing. Bryman (2016) notes that previous researchers have noticed a tendency of participatory researchers whose goal is to not be holistic in their note taking tend to be influenced by their background when deciding what should or should not be noted down (p.444). Bryman further suggests that mundane and dull events that might not seem important to note down can reveal new things about the subject of study (Bryman, 2016, p.445). As such I tried to describe as much as possible even the most mundane parts of the cafe.

Participant observation

The Main data was collected through field notes during participant observation at “At home cafe” in Akihabara and “Maidreaming’s Akihabara the secret base Store”. Participant observation in anthropology is the act of taking part in the daily life such as rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people, to understand the explicit and tacit aspect of a group’s culture and life routines. Explicit being the consciously aware part that people can describe about themselves, while the tacit part is the unconscious part of culture in which we react to something without explicitly knowing the reason why, like the uncomfortableness of seeing people act in norm breaking ways (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, pp.1–2). Bryman (2016) explains that participatory observation is the act of observing what is going on in a group, by listening to conversations - both the researcher’s own conversation with the subject but also among them, and observing the behaviour of the group (Bryman, 2016, p.423). During the field visit, the researcher engaged with both maids online and on location. Talking and ordering food and services under the role of a regular customer. The benefit of doing this was that, by entering the place as a customer, I was able to easily get access to the space to conduct my research. My observations focused on both animate and inanimate bodies at the cafe. The inanimate bodies were the decor music, and consumer goods of the cafe, the services advertised, as well as the location of the cafe. The animate bodies were the maids, and customers who were being Looked at how they interacted between customers and with me, what sort of services they provided and how that was done. This was written down into a little book of field notes during six visits, split in half between at home cafe and Maidreaming secret base store. These visits were conducted between 31/1 and 17/2 -2014. Normally, ethnographic research is conducted over a large scale of time, going on for years. However, Bryman (2016) writes that it is possible to conduct micro ethnography of a few weeks or months by focusing on a specific topic or part of a group (Bryman, 2016, p.424)

Passive or active participant

Active and passive participation is about the degree of which the researcher participates in the activities going on during their observation (Bryman, 2016, pp.438–439). During the time spent at the cafe, I found myself both passively observing the other maids and customers interacting as a passive observer. This was because, at times both long and short, the maids were not interacting with me but rather leaving me to my own entertainment. Thus, during these times, I was not participating in any activity or interaction at the cafe. leaving me to take the role of

an observer. But at the same time, this passive observation would be interrupted by the maid waitresses coming up to serve me food, engage in rituals with me, and engage in short conversation. Thus, I had to become an active participant in these moments. This meant that I was flowing between passive observation and active participation in the cafe. As the field studies progressed on location, I came to realize this was the normal experience at the cafe, the burst of activity followed by passively waiting for the maids to come to you. Thus, this flow of activity and passivity is the active participation when being at the cafe.

Online data collection

Virtual ethnography refers to the study of digital cultures, or the use of online methods that can improve the research (Born & Haworth, 2017, p.70). In this thesis, virtual ethnography is used to observe the online presence and online affective labour used by maid cafes that expands the atmosphere created to outside of the cafe. The online data was collected from public posts, reels, and stories posted by the Instagram account of the maids I meet and found from “At home cafe” and “Maidreaming Akihabara secret base store”. Posts are permanent photos posted on the Instagram profile that have no set expiration date. Similarly, reels have the same function, except it is a short few seconds’ video clip. Stories, on the other hand, are timed posts that are only available for view for a couple of hours, before they are automatically removed and unviewable again. The data was collected from the accounts I found and got access to between January-April in 2024. A total of 54 posts and stories were collected from “At home cafe” and 38 Instagram posts and stories were collected from “Maidreaming Akihabara secret base store”. These posts were collected as they were posted as stories.

Sampling

This thesis used a purposive sampling method in order to collect relevant data to answer the research question. Bryman (2016) writes that the purposive sampling method is the process of collecting data in reference to the research question, so that the data is suitable towards answering the research question (Bryman, 2016, p.410). Hood (2007) writes that the sampling of the research data with a purposive sampling approach can either be priori or contingent. When it is contingent, the subject of the sampling can change over time as the focus and scope of the research is subject to change, while prior approach means that the subject of research is determined before the sampling has begun and does not change during the research process (as cited in Bryman, 2016, p.410). This thesis used a prior approach to sampling as the focus of

the research was determined before the location for conducting research was determined. This was chosen as the researcher had limited time in Japan, so it was needed to be time efficient and to find suitable location for data collection early on, so that more time could be spent collecting data. Once locations were selected for sampling, the online data was determined based on the maids meet during the fieldwork and the location visited.

Analysis method and coding

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is the systematic process of finding meaning within many different types of texts. Often the aim of qualitative content analysis is to identify categories, and the underlying themes found in the material being analysed (Bryman, 2016, p.563; Drisko & Maschi, 2015, pp.86–87). Content analysis was done through thematic coding, or thematic analysis. To be able to analyse the collected data, this thesis used coding of the data in order to find themes and links to the theoretical framework in the data. Coding can be described as a technique that is used as a way to structure data in a way that makes it easier to analyse (Kar & Panigrahi, 2023, p.80). The data was coded using thematic coding or thematic analysis in the coding program Nvivo 14. Themes were made with the intention of using them to answer the research question. They were divided up into themes based on different bodies at the cafe with the ability to use affect. The coding process involved starting with open coding. Drisko and Mash (2015) write that initially coding should be open and inclusive, as over the coding process the themes and meanings of the data will be refined and reworked. Creating a hierarchical system where you have core themes, and sub themes. (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, pp.104–105). Hierarchy was thus formed with bodies at the top, these bodies were maids, consumer goods, and space. Guests were considered as an actor. however, the reason guests are not considered one of the actors is because they are the ones being acted upon. And as such the labour of these three actors involve in manways the attempt to make guest participate in the atmosphere and attune to it.

The themes used for my coding went through 3 iterations before it was settled on three core actors (Maids, Commercial goods, and Space). These were then coded in to main themes and sub themes. Maids had the main themes of building relationships. Consumer goods as a body was themed under Affect (as emotional attachment). Space was focusing on the layout, the music, and the food of the cafe. Subsequently, this was then used to show how these different bodies created and formed the atmosphere of these spaces. The data coded was from the field notes, the collected online data, and the consumer goods collected during field work.

Ethical considerations

This thesis, during the fieldwork and after, complies with the Swedish Research Council's (2017) guidelines for ethical research. The fieldwork was conducted openly and when asked about what I was doing I would explain that I was conducting field work for my master thesis and was collecting data from the cafe. Maids were allowed to freely see what I was writing down; I wrote it in English so they would often ask what I was writing about. I would then disclose to them what I had written and ask them if they were okay with that. Data collected at the location were written as to not give out any individual information of the maids working. Photos of the space and the maids were collected through their paid services of taking a Polaroid with the maids. Initially, this thesis was going to include some of these photos but after consultation with my supervisor, it was decided not to keep them in and instead describe them, to ensure anonymity of the maids and that no unwanted photos are made available. Similarly, the online data will also only be described as even though some of it may be made public data, the maids have not been asked for permission to use the images here. Furthermore, some of the online data comprises of stories posted on Instagram, which are temporary posts that disappear after a certain amount of time. As such, the intention is not for the viewer to be able to go back and see it again after the set time. In addition to this, many of the accounts used by maids are private ones. They advertise themselves as maids for the cafe they work at, but post photos from outside of work. As such, these images will not be made available or used as examples in this thesis, but examples will be described. The images used are used after discussion with the supervisor to be appropriate.

Limitations

Initially, the plan was to spend a much longer period conducting site visits to the chosen cafes in Akihabara. However, due to illness the last 3 weeks of my time in Japan, this had to be cut short. To make up for this, more data was collected from online sources instead. This thesis is unable to make broad generalizations as its main focus is on only two maid cafes and the data collection was limited to only 6 visits in total. Furthermore, there are other online spaces that could have been used for online data for this thesis. However, to keep the scope manageable, it was decided to only use posts from Instagram. Furthermore, there is an imbalance between post from "Maidreaming" and "at home cafe", with "at home" having more posts. However, this is because the posts collected from "Maidreaming" were mainly from an account posting as the cafe as a whole, with the maids posting together on that account. The "At home cafe"

accounts, on the other hand, were mainly from individual maids. Mainly maids I had meet through out my field work and maids who were elevated to be the face of the maid cafe. such a premium, super premium, and legendary maids.

In the production of knowledge during the time collecting data, my position as a European graduate student in Japan has had an influence on the knowledge produced in this thesis. During my field visits, the spoken language with the maids was Japanese. As a speaker, I am on a conversational level but not fully fluent, meaning that at times my understanding of what was said may be faulty and subject to misinterpretation. This may impact the results of this thesis. To overcome this, I tried to always ask for clarification when I did not understand something or I when appropriate. Many times, when interacting with maids for the first time they would be surprised that I could speak Japanese. And it wasn't until they knew they could communicate with me in Japanese that they felt more comfortable interacting with me. Thus, their perception of my Japanese language skills could have prevented some interactions with the maids, especially those uncomfortable with English. However, while my appearance and outside opinions can not be influenced easily. Most maids did however open up quickly once they knew I spoken Japanese, at least on a conversational level.

One thing that became clear during the fieldwork is that, because interviews with customers or maids were not conducted, the description of the atmosphere and emotions felt from the affective labour of the maids and the tuning into the atmosphere were description coming from my own body being affected by the collective of the maid cafes atmosphere. Anotoni and Demouchel (2017) wrote in their paper "Feeling with the world" that in anthropology there have been calls to investigate the construction of the human experience and social phenomenon through the body and as it interacts with its environment. Similarly, in other areas of social science, the importance of physical sensations, affects, and the felt impressions has become more important. This also lent itself to more focus also being placed in ethnography on the experience of the ethnographer's perceptions, feelings and sensations (Antoni & Dumouchel, 2017, p.91). This need to rely on my own bodily experience also stems from the role I took as a researcher at these spaces. As a customer, the goal of the maids is to use affective labour in order to create relationships with me but also to affect my emotions into wanting to spend money on interacting with them. Ingold (2000) writes that "feeling is a mode of active, perceptual engagement, a way of being literally 'in touch' with the world." (as cited in Antoni & Dumouchel, 2017, p.94). Therefore, some of the data is my subjective experience with the

space, combined with the observations made within the space, and about the space. Because of this this thesis implements some Auto-ethnographic methodology in its collection of data. Simply put auto ethnography is when the researcher uses own experience, emotions, and critical reflections as a source of primary data in their research (Tarisayi, 2023, p.54).

Analysis

Briefly before going into the analysis of maid cafe's this section will explain how maid cafe's work. Drawing from my own experience at the maid cafes "at home maid cafe" and "Maidreaming" and Galbraith's (2019) explanation of how maid cafes work, I will give a brief explanation of maid cafes and point out parts of interest moving forward in this thesis. To enter At-home, guests are often asked to wait outside the cafe until a maid comes and invites them in. While waiting one of the staff working will come out, ask if it is the guest first time, explain the rules to them if they are new, then they wait for a maid to come and invite them in and seat you. Other establishments might however have a maid who will come and meet the guest when they walk in through the door and then seat them (as seen at Maidreaming secret base cafe). Either way, there is a distinct difference between inside and outside the cafe. once seated the guest will come over and show them the menu (see appendix p.46. From here the service begin, the guests will have to pay for a sit-down fee and a drink. and then they can stay for an hour. During this it is not guaranteed that the original maid who served them initially will be with them through out the whole hour. But rather it will switch dependent on who is available when the orders are ready. The guests can order food, drinks, and desserts. Or they can order combo meal who includes a photo with a maid of their choosing (see appendix p.58-59). When the time is up the guest will leave a maid will once again ring the bell and announce the guest is leaving and they will say goodbye to them.

The bodies who affect

When looking at the actors that work collectively to form the atmosphere of maid cafes, there are three major actors identified. These were the maids themselves, the space of the cafe, and the material goods sold inside and outside of the cafe. The identification of these three actors derived from how they act within the cafe and the function they serve within it, both on their own but also interconnectedly. As discussed in the theoretical framework, atmospheres can not

be reduced to a single source, nor removed or attached to a single body (Riedel, 2019, p.84). meaning then that these bodies all contribute to the creation of atmosphere.

This analysis section will start by looking at maids, their labour and how they use relationship building, both online and offline, to create a friendly, welcoming and warm atmosphere. Then, consumer goods, both as services such as drawing on food or on photos, but also in the consumption of good related to the relation with a maid. Finally, the space itself will be discussed. How it is laid out, the aesthetic of it, how it relates to *Moe* ascetics. But also, how people are welcomed into it as an invitation into the atmosphere of the space. At the end of each part they will go over how each helps answer the research question “what are the actors that create an social atmosphere and how do these actors collectively form and maintain the affective atmosphere at maid cafes”.

These parts have overlaps in them due to the interconnected nature of these different actor. The action of one actor is often in connection with another. For example, the action of drawing on a newly taken photo in front on a guest is also an opportunity to talk with them. Meaning that the service of drawing on the photo is also a time to form connections with the customer. Similarly, when it is time to take a photo, the guest will stand on a stage from which almost all other seats are facing. Putting them in the limelight of all the guests waiting, while the maids will usually take this time to chat with them a well. Because of this there is an overlapping aspect between each part of the actors work at the cafe. Meaning that parts of the analysis will have some overlap with the previous part.

Building relations

Maids at maid cafes like “Maidreaming” and “At home cafe” are the ones serving guests food, inform the guest about the rules of the place, and act as the attraction to the cafe. But maids also do a lot more for the cafes. They are the social actors in the space who are hired to entertain and create fun experiences for the guests, so that they come back (Galbraith, 2019, p.188). One of the main themes found throughout this work is that of creating a social space through relationship building and commercial incentives. Relationship building is part of it because maid cafe’s rely a core fan base of regulars (Galbraith, 2019, p.188) Kolehmainen and Mäkinen

(2021) writes that the experience of affect has become one of the main selling points in modern western societies instead of the product itself (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.451). You can see the affective experience being sold at maid cafes through rituals and conversations.

Rituals

Looking at the role of Rituals, maids use them to invite guests into the atmosphere of fun and liveliness by making the guests a part of the rituals attached to serving them their orders. At home, there are special shake drinks that when they are served, the maid will chant a repetitive little chant with the guest the chant goes “*moe moe, shaka shaka, kyu kyu, wan wan, nyan nyan, oishikunare, moe moe kyu!!*”. The act of performing this chant means that maid says the first word twice, example “*moe moe*“, and the guest repeating it all this while the maid shakes the drink for the guest (see appendix p. 58). Here the maid engages in affective labour by performing for the guest front of them. This performance is an act of affective labour as the maid is trying to entertain the guest with a fun song. This entertainment is enhanced by the guest being allowed to act with them maid and chant with them. Because atmospheres are able to be intensified by patterns of affective imitation (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.458). This kind of back-and-forth imitation helps strengthening the atmosphere of happiness and fun felt by the guest. The last bit of the shake drink is that the maid will ask the guest to guess what colour the drink they have prepared is. And then they will ask what colour of the straw they want. There is a performance here interlaced with service towards the guest. From my own experience at the at-home cafe’s doing shake drinks was always on of the most enjoyable menu items. Through out my field work many maids will work with an almost constant excitement when performing rituals. And as the sha It’s an item that encapsulate the collective nature of maid cafes. As discussed by Kolehmainen and Mäkinen (2021) the creation of atmospheres are an collective effort that goes beyond the experience of one body (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.458). Using then rituals that involves the guest allows then the maid to form a fun atmosphere with the guest.

Another ritual performed with the guest, when they are served anything consumable such as food, drink or dessert, is that they together with the maid will make a heart shape with their hands and fingers, and then swaying it from side to side they will say together “*oishikunari moe moe kyu*” (become delicious *moe moe* kiss). Which is a way to metaphorically imbue the object with deliciousness through the power of *moe* (See appendix p.48). This ritual invites the guest to engage with the maids in a predictable way. As atmosphere creation is a collective

endeavour, these rituals as immaterial labour become a way for guests to become informed of the culture of the space. The repetitive and simple nature of these rituals means that guest quickly learns them. They are also something done both at At-home and Maidreaming secret base does similarly. Meaning they are transferable knowledge as well. As discussed by Fanasca (2019) in the theoretical framework, the creation of bonds and connection is made from the repeating communication and interaction with affective labour. The repeating ritual then of blessing each food dish by collectively saying “*oishikunaru moe moe kyu!*” is then a way to form relations with the guest and create a sense of community. This relationship building is then both form out of cultural understanding of when a ritual will happen. But also, a way to create a relationship with the maids performing it with the guests. Helping them creates a fun and friendly atmosphere where guests and maids can bond over the shared rituals. These rituals are also good ice breakers to start conversation with the guests from.

Throughout the field notes there is a constant part of maids striking up conversation with me or with other customers. This is often done in connection to doing another service, such as serving food, taking a photo, or decorating a photo. When maids are interacting in conversation with guests at the cafe, whether “Maidreaming” and “At Home”, it is very similar. At both locations, it involves conversing with the customer while performing different services for them such as drawing on their latte or food. The maids must show interest in the life of the customer by asking questions and engaging in conversation with them. During my visits to “At Home cafes” and “Maid dreaming secret base” conversations was the most common form of interaction I had with the maids. The affective labour of conversing and engaging with the guest created a social atmosphere in these spaces, as it is one of the major selling points of it. It is this social atmosphere that is one of the affective experiences being sold to the customers.

By having maids engage with me in conversation I felt like I was at the center of the conversation, which made me feel special. Their affective labour of showing interests in me whether they are interested or not, creates the sensation of being cared about. At “Maidreaming secret base” (see appendix p 50-53,53-55,60-66). when I visited it there were seldom many customers, meaning that it would be enough for me to buy a drink with the sit-down fee to have a lot of time interacting with the maids. The reason for this was that there often were 1 or 2 other guests other than me when I visited. The maids who worked had a lot of time in between serving guests food and taking pictures that they were able to fill by interacting more with guests in conversation. Thus, to fill that space of time they would spend it talking and

interacting with the customers or talking amongst themselves. During this time, they would engage in small conversations. Often when I visited, they would spend time asking me about where I am from, my interests, and what I was studying. The engagement of affective labour here by interacting with the customer maintains the atmosphere that the guest was invited into when entering the cafe. In comparison to “At Home”, “Maidreaming” does not paywall the interaction and conversation behind purchases of food and drinks, or photos with the maid, but rather the maids are allowed to interact with the customers more freely. This lends the store towards having a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Since I went to the same store multiple times throughout my site visits, the maids there started to recognise me and I them. Thus, I started to form relations with the maids at the Maidreaming secret base store.

However, their goal is still to sell the customer services and items. As such, the friendly atmosphere has the potential to completely absorb the visitor. Especially when alcohol is involved. In the evening, “Maidreaming” has a special event known as a hyper. Hyper means that the focus is that the visit is meant to be more of a party with alcohol being at the centre. When I consumed alcohol at the space one of the maids used it as a moment to ask if the I would like to purchase a photo. This happened to me on the last day I was able to visit Maidreaming secret base store (see appendix pp.60-62). I had spent an hour there, engaged with the maids and was in a very good mood. Normally I would always avoid alcohol during field work. However as hyper was extensively advertised as a sort of party with alcohol as a main part (but optional), I decided to have one drink. So, I ordered my Favorite alcoholic drink and conversed with the maids. Throughout the evening, I engaged in conversations with the maids. Which was a very enjoyable experience as at some point, I had forgotten I was in a room of strangers and felt like I was spending time with friends (see appendix pp.60-66). During the hyper event, maids would eventually come out with a big tray of different flavoured shots that they then offer to me. They wrap it up in a moment where they change the music and announce it to everyone. You can opt out of buying a shot, but then you will also be left out of the moment and stuck to only watch as everyone else takes the shot without you. The shot is taken in a moment of song and dance and then celebrated when finished. When done one of the maids came up to me gave me a finger heart with their fingers and once they touched they said *kyu*. When I had received my shot i realized it was frozen and needed to be heated up before I could drink it. I told the maids thinking I would get a new shot, but instead they provided special service by heating it with their own hands after the event of taking the shot was over. Once heated enough the shot was handed over to me and I could drink it, feeling the affect of it

quickly fill my body. In the end I was so involved in the moment that I was almost convinced to paid for another hour in order to stay in it for a bit longer. Then, when I was about to leave, I was asked if I wanted a photo with one of the maids, and because of my good mood and the sense of joy in the space atmosphere, I bought it. It was a moment I wanted to remember as a fun night out. So taking a photo with one of the maids was a good way to save the moment. Using then the atmosphere as a body to affect the people who are attuned to the it to buy consumer goods. However, as there was alcohol involved this might have had an significant impact on how easily I attuned to the atmosphere and was swayed by it in the moment. However as showing in the example above it was an evening when over the course of the visit, the atmosphere was more and more able to affect and move my own body. As a contagious thing maids were able to use the affective labour of talking with me through out the evening to keep me in the atmosphere. Affecting my behaviour to for instance join in with taking a shot with the maids. Combining with the events, shared activities and display of friendly affection the atmosphere was able to affect me and sweep me away into the moment.

In contrast, the caring feeling of the maids can be weaponised as a strategy to make them spend money on consumer goods at the cafe. When I visited “At Home” on 31/1-2024 and 3/2-2024 (see appendix pp. 46-49, 53-55), I did not buy anything more than a drink. This meant that the only interaction I got with the maids was when they served me my drink. After that they left me alone. Thus, the maid cafe became like a regular cafe where I had my drink alone. The effect of this became apparent fast, when all I could do was sit and watch the maids run around interacting with customers, or customers taking photos with maids or sitting silently on their phone. The effect was that of disassociating me from the atmosphere of the space. The cosy happy buzzing place of the cafe faded away and all that was left was a space I was isolated from. This feeling of being left out for the rest of my hour there left me to wonder how I could get back into that atmosphere. So, during my second visit (3/2-2024), I ordered a drink at first and interacted a little with the maid, then was left alone, until halfway through my stay when I asked a maid if I could buy a Polaroid photo. Suddenly, the maid was happy to talk with me and engage with me. Once again, I became part of the atmosphere of the space, as suddenly I was getting attention again. This attention was kept until I had to leave when the maid asked me to come talk with them again. This shows that consumer goods, and space is not enough to keep up the atmosphere. Engagement from the maids that provide opportunities for the guest to also get involved in the creation of atmosphere is also needed. Kolehmainen and Mäkinen (2021) writes that atmospheres can not make people feel particular things but rather it is how

people feel that makes atmospheres perceptible (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021, p.459). This might be then the case that by maids acting happy to be asked to be taken a photo with them they are able to imbue the receiver with similar feelings. Making them able to perceive the atmosphere of the space. As such it is then not the absence of interaction that made me feel out of the atmosphere. But rather my emotional state not being aligned with the atmosphere that the maids were creating. Meaning then that the use of conversation is also a way to use affective labour to make the guest feel a certain way that makes them more susceptible to feel the atmosphere of the maid space.

When looking at online activities, “At Home” have an official store account that stands for all the cafes under the franchise. However, many of the maids working at the different cafes will have their own official Instagram account where they post about their life, share their work schedule for that week, and post promotional events or sales of their photoshoots to their followers. While maids are not able to respond to direct messages or comments on their posts, they will often use an Instagram feature where they can prompt people to send them a question or just a message on one of their story posts. They can then see the messages and questions sent to them. One of the maids, who I will call Sakura, who I started to follow my first visit to a maid cafe during my location scouting, used this feature to respond to all the messages sent to her in following story posts. Story posts are temporary, only lasting a few hours or 1 to 2 days. However, it allows them to get around the direct message and comment restriction they are under and interact more directly with their followers. Sakura would also post pictures of herself in different outfits with cute filters, of her cat, different locations she visited on her days off, in her casual clothing outside of the uniform, and with other maids she worked with or had meet outside of work. It gave a much more personal view of her that you would not see at the cafe. Sakura’s Instagram was then a mix of both interacting with her followers and showing pictures of her in cute outfits or cute filters that imbues the viewer with feelings of *moe*. The interaction allowed her to engage with her followers by reacting or answering their messages and question to her. Meaning that she could build up a community and connection to her followers within the virtual space. While it is hard to determine what sort of atmosphere is formed from this. However, for me when viewing her reels there was a sense of excitement to it. Because I was able to watch some respond to people outside of the cafe. meaning to me that even if I am not in japan, I can still stay in contact with them if I wanted. It also means I am aware of when new photo sets are released.

Consumer goods

At-home and Maidreaming both do not allow guest to take their own photos of the maids. However, they can take a photo with the maids for a prize. This photo is a Polaroid photo also called a チェキ (*Cheki*). However, Maidreaming allow guest to take on with their own phone instead if they want. At Maidreaming the maid will hand a little paper to the guest, who then have to hand over this paper to the maid they want a photo with. It then serves as a way for maids and guests to interact, and for guest to show appreciation for a maid more directly. In terms of atmosphere this also means that the guest will see the maids face and reaction as they thank the guest for picking them to take a photo with. Their reaction to the photo request can be used to affect the guest feelings in a way that make them attune to the atmosphere or feel the atmosphere of the space.

In contrast At-home will hand over the guest a larger paper menu that displays all the maids working at the cafe at that time. the Guest can then at their own time pick out which ever maid they want to have a photo with. unless asking the maid serving you the menu, the guest will not see the maid's reaction. It then becomes less of an intimate choice and more of the feeling of picking food form the menu at a restaurant. It can be an uncomfortable experience if not prepared for it for the unaware. As it objectifies the young women working at the cafe as nothing more than a product. However, this is only true when looking at it without the context in mind. as discussed in the literature review at maid cafe's, maids are characters played by people there to play a role. As such when viewed from this perspective it is less of an uncomfortable aura or atmosphere and more of a neutral cold one. Where the real emotional attachment comes from knowing the maid and the subsequent interaction with them. As such the menu itself is filled with the potential of interacting with the desired maid. This excitement from the menu and meeting the maid I wanted to meet is seen in the reflections of meeting Sakura for a second time (see appendix pp.63-66). Where I was genuinely nervous to meet her again, as I was afraid of having been forgotten by her. However, this was not the case and she remembered me. However, she did remember me saying that because we had a very long conversation last time of course she remembered me which was a big source of joy for me to be recognized (see appendix pp. 63-66). this highlights then that as a tool this menu is able to ensure guest get to meet the maid they want to meet. Increasing chances of being recognized or having those feelings recognized.

The two styles of picking a maid to have a photo with show the affective ability to facilitate creations of atmosphere. With the paper at maid dreaming the guest gets to see the maid's reaction to being asked to take a photo with, allowing the maid to potentially affect in such a way that they can perceive the atmosphere of the space. While the menu style of At-home affects the guest itself when picking which maid to take a photo with, given the pre-conditions of knowing a maid before. It can in still an tense atmosphere of expectations and wants. That are released once meeting the maid.

When haven taken a photo with a maid at the cafe, the maid will customize it by drawing on it and writing on it. The effect of this is that these services make the guest feel special. Because they receive something original and made on the spot. The style of the personalization may be similar each time, maids will often change up it, and make it unique in its own way. This uniqueness comes from the labour itself the maid is drawing it specifically for the guest. This makes them feel special and more inclined to interact with the maid again. meeting Sakura for the first time she has wrote 萌え (モエ, moe) on the photo I took with her. However, on our second meeting, in addition to writing our names, date, and Love She also wrote また会えた (mata aeta) meaning see you again. Showing that she wants me to come see her again. Now if that is what she genuinely feels, is a different question. But it shows the sort of engagement maids engage with customers using this service. It creates the sensation of the maid wanting to interact with me. The act of writing on the photo then through its intimacy of affective is able to form relations over time. It creates the sensation of friendship and help bond the guest with the maid. thus, if affective labour is something that creates atmosphere and connections. Then these connections help the formation and maintenance of atmosphere. Because of these connections I've maid with maids such as Sakura both online and in person or visiting Maidreaming secret base became easier to attune to the atmosphere of the space. Because they were all more and more familiar, and I knew what to expect. As such it became clear that consumer goods such as photos were a tool that could be used to both instil emotions and attune you to the atmosphere through the association of the selected maid. But also, by how they were used to interact with the maid and guests.

Space

When entering a Maidreaming Secret Base Store, you will be greeted by one of the serving maids who will ring a bell and they and any other maid working will tell you Welcome home

Master or Lady (*Okairinasia goujoujisama/ ojou-sama*) with a smile and lead you to a free seat at the cafe for the size of the group attending (see appendix pp.46-49). The effect of it is the feeling of belonging and is a fast way to invite the guests into the atmosphere of the cafe. As they are jolted by the energy of the multitude of maids talking in unison. It also imbues the visitor with a sense of connection and belonging. By being acknowledged the moment you step inside it brings in the feeling of being wanted there. This might be extra impactful in contemporary Japan, where home life is not what it used to be, as precarity of work prevents most of having a family of their own. Perhaps then the welcoming home is a way to tell people that this is their real or second home. It suggests the formation of a third space within the cafe. The third space are spaces in-between work where people can have informal and intimate relations to be created within the space due to the neutrality of the space. Third spaces also have a playing leveling field where experiences are provided with equality. Lastly third places also allow for a degree of playfulness. However it is argued that commercial spaces are unable to be third spaces due to the suppression of conversation between guests (Warner et al., 2013, pp.310–311). Maid cafes are similar to third spaces in that they have aspects of a third space. They encourage people to talk with maids, and they allow for playfulness within the space. They will provide an experience equally to all who can pay which means this is a part where maid cafes don't perfectly align with a third space. However Warner et al (2013) also says that third spaces often feel more like home than home (Warner et al., 2013, p.311). And in many ways at home and Maidreaming secret base can feel at home within its atmospheres. As a key part of maid's work is to form relations with the guest. These relations become familiar and at moments one can feel at home within the space that you forget the commercial nature of it (see appendix pp.60-66).

There is also a separation of outside and inside space at maid cafe's to enable the creation of atmosphere. This is most clear in the case of at home maid cafe. Where a maid will welcome you in after you have waited outside the cafe for them to let you in. Then you will walk with them through a small corridor that eventually leads to the inside of the cafe. Once you are at boarder between the sitting area of the cafe and the corridor the maid will ring a bell announce that you have arrived and all the maids working at the floor will turn to you and welcome you home Master/princess (*Okarinasai gousjoujisama/ ojou-sama*).² This choir of attention welcomes in the guest into the space and atmosphere. The small corridor into the wide cafe

² Youtube video showing the events of entering the cafe.
https://youtu.be/u90AN5QpbXE?si=OM_Ls2qUeQhlenRh&t=151

become the transition between entering and leaving the atmosphere. The feeling becomes that of entering another world. With clear separation between inside and outside of the cafe, there are no windows inside the cafes and if there are they are covered. Giving the feeling of an enclosed space where no outsiders can peer in. As discussed by Galbraith (2019) earlier in the literature review. Maid cafes have their origin in video games (Galbraith, 2019, p.209). And as such the clear lines between outside and inside the cafe help highlight this. The feeling of entering a world where you can meet fictional girls gets a natural separation. On the inside of the cafe, you can interact as if it is a game. Part of a fictive narrative where you can predict the outcomes of your actions. The act then of repeating the welcoming phrase to guests the same way, become an expected pattern that guests can use as a signal between entering a world of fiction. While being wish goodbye at the end signals the end of this fiction. I found after hearing the welcoming upon entering the cafe a few times my guard was lowered with the familiarity of being welcomed home. Creating a sense of familiar belonging.

At the space both cafe franchises play their own music. Performed by maids working for the cafe that are often the more famous and renowned maids such as At home cafe's Chimu or Hitomi. These songs are often upbeat and bright songs that create a fun and relaxed atmosphere. This is also enhanced by the layout of the cafes. At Home has a set up where there are rows of tables at different heights so a customer does not block the view of the one behind them. The direction these seats are facing is a stage. Here the maids will take photos of themselves and for guests. These photos taken on the stage of only maids can be purchased by the guests as a special gift. This happens often when there is a special event going on like a cosplay themed day at the cafe. In addition to this both At Home and Maidreaming have their maids' model for photo shoots in both their maid uniforms but also in different cute costumes. And then offer it up for sale for fans of the maids who might want a cute photo of their maid. These photos can both be cute and suggestive. Another way they use the space to create atmosphere is with colours and decoration. At Home maid cafe have a pastel and pink aesthetic. Almost like a doll house. These photos then allow the guests to bring with them a part of the maid cafe home. Where they can display their favorite maids and associate it with the cafe, expanding the space outside of the cafe. The cafe is also decorated by having photos of the super premium maids. This shows the status of these maids as representatives of the cafes. While Maidreaming secret base is very green and uses the layout of a bar with chalk boards to give the sensation of it being more of a bar. Maidreaming also have a stage at their locations. However, all the seats are not designed to face it. For instance, at Secret base there is a bar counter where around 8

guests can sit at right at the entrance to the space. But the stage is 90* degrees to the side of them meaning they have to turn around in order to see it properly. On the other hand, there are tables with chairs at the other end of the room facing the stage. Thus, both Maidreaming secret base cafe and At Home maid cafe uses their astatic in order to create a desired atmosphere. Simerly to at home Maidreaming display wallpapers of the maids working at the cafe on their wall. The difference is that these are purchasable and serve as advertisement for the guest being there.

The Stage being present at both cafes shows then the association between maid cafes as performance spaces. It gives it an openness to charades of the cafe. that could easily break the atmosphere of the space. But rather enhances it. As visiting the cafe, you are made aware of the performing nature of the maids. The decorations covering the cafes adds an artificial charm showing the commercial nature of the cafe. by the exaggerated smiles and perfect pictures of the maids in the wall photos to the wallpapers for sale hanging around the cafe. As such the space at maid cafe's is both highlights the artificial nature of maid cafes. But through it's separation of outside and inside, it makes this artificiality clear to the guest. Allowing them to step in to the atmosphere of the cafe, as if leaving the world behind at the gate. And into the enclosed space of the maid cafe. allowing all the sense to be tuned in to the beating hearth of the cafe.

Conclusion

Maid cafes are complex spaces that uses multiple actors in order to create and use atmosphere. They serve as both social spaces where people can form a sense of belonging and attachment to maids. These attachments can then be leveraged to sell products such as polaroid photos and services at the space. As such the atmosphere is fined tuned through affective labour both online and at the cafe to home in on these affective feelings in order to guide guests to spend money at the cafe. this is done through three actors: maids, consumer goods, and space. And their interconnected interactions between each other. Maids will use interactions such as conversations in order to form relationships with the guest, but also to control the guests emotions by affecting them with the desired feelings. These feelings can be used to give the right feeling in order to make them attune to the atmosphere of the space. This can also be used as a way to encourage guests to buy consumer goods such as photos with the maids. As the absence of the atmosphere can make the guest feel isolated and alone. As such buying a photo

is a way to be invited back into the space. Rituals are similarly used as a tool to connect the guest to the atmosphere. By teaching them cultural rituals that repeat on pre-determined triggers. Such as the shake drink always including a chant. The serving of food, drinks and deserts always starts with the maid and guest doing a *moe moe kyu* together. It highlights the collective aspect of forming atmosphere. Where it allows the guest to self-engage with the creation of atmosphere by joining the maid in activities. Maids also use online media such as Instagram to connect with guests online. Allowing them to form bonds outside of the cafe and enable new ways of interactions through open questions and answers through Instagram stories.

In a similar way consumer goods are used to enhance the connection between maid and guest. actions with the material aspect of giving a piece of paper to maid allow the direct affecting of desired emotion back at the guest by showing the maids reaction to being picked. While picking from the menu is a way that creates excitement as the anticipation of meeting the maid they wanted builds up. Furthermore, the act of personalizing photos creates emotional attachments to the object. As the maid made it personally for you with often messages and handmade drawings. Especially when the maid has been met before, meaning that messages can be more meaningful and personal. consumer goods such as photos are tools that affect bodies by their association with a maid. These items can also attune the viewer to atmospheres through the expectations of meeting the maid they wanted to meet.

Finally, space is used to create atmosphere through associating the entering of it with a feeling of home and creating a partial third space within it. But also, by separating the inside and outside of the cafe with clear distinctions such as blocking all sight in to the cafe. this then creates the atmosphere of entering a different world. And being separated from outside distractions enabling the guests to be fully engrossed in the activities at the cafe.

In conclusion this thesis asked the question the research question “what are the actors that create an affective atmosphere and how do these actors collectively form and maintain the affective atmosphere at maid cafes?”. The actors involved in creating and forming atmosphere within maid cafes are Maids, Consumer goods, and space. They achieve the creation of atmosphere and the maintenance of it by constantly involving the guest in activities. Such as conversations, personalizing photos, intimate services such as the 3 second stare drink, and hosting events throughout their time at the cafe. Consumer goods serve as further chances to interact with the maids and helps create anticipation for meeting maids the guest want to meet.

Lastly space enables the cafe to create atmospheres that are contained within the cafe. enabling the cafe to operate its atmosphere without it being disrupted by the outside world.

For further research the use of online media and affective labour and affect, by maid cafes' is a field not fully explored. Previous papers have focused on net idols in Japan and their labour (Lukacs, 2015). However, there is a rich amount of data produced by maid cafes online, such as blog posts, music videos, personal character spotlights for maids, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) usages and much more. Thus, there is a rich data set available for exploring. Furthermore, there would be great value in continuing research on maid cafes and other concept cafes with a gendered perspective. As this thesis was unable to really delve into it due to it expanding the scope too much.

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Appendix

Coding

The first part will show a color-coding of the different bodies to give an overview of the coding process.

Green for consumer goods

Blue for maids

Yellow for space

Field notes

Visit; At Home Cafe 3F Main store. time and day: 16:36-17:35, (31/1-2024)

When I went to the café I walked through Akihabara and my first impression is how many different maids you can see standing on the street handing out flyers to people walking by trying to get people to come into their café/bar. Once I reached the floor, I waited outside with other guests waiting to get in. at this point one of the non-maid staff will come out of the shop and ask how many people are going into the café and if you have been there before. If it is your first time you will be introduced to the maid café system and the rules of conduct at the café. When waiting outside most solo guests keep to themselves. But, if need be, they are open for small conversation. Veterans of the place are more than happy to help new people or talk about where you from. When it is your turn to go in you are greeted by a maid who welcomes you in., she takes the lead and when you reach past the threshold where the entrance, with the cashier, kitchen and all can be seen, and where the maid café scene starts the maid rings a bell and your arrival is announced. All the maids that are not occupied in the moment will then turn and welcome your home. After that the maid takes you to your seat and they take your order. If it is the first time, they will explain the menu and the different set combos you can buy. There

is food combo, desert combo, drink combo, and full combo. All of them include a drink of choice, either food or desert, and a photo with the maid. If you get the full combo, you will also receive a gift to bring home. (the drink combo is only drink and photo). Most maids are a bit reserved when it comes to foreigners if they are not comfortable with English. But most will open up once they find out you speak Japanese (as a foreigner, etc).

The room the room you sit in is formed a bit like a theater where almost all the tables are single row and facing a scene at the other end of the room. Only a few tables for four or more have guests facing away from the scene. The scene is very much like a theater scene in which they have a scene redå (scene curtain) and on top of it is the At home café logo). On the stage the maids will take different photos. Most of the time it is with the guests but also for themselves. The guest order at the start a photo with a maid of their choice. Often the maid will hand over the guest a full album where it displays all the maids working that day. The guest is then offered to chose with maid they want to take a photo with. Premium maids and super premium maids working that day. If a guest wants to take a photo with them, they have to pay extra. With increasing prices all the way up to the legendary maid Hitomi. The photo is taken at regular intervals when the maids have the time for it. Often towards the end of a guests stay. Or the middle of it. The maid who you have chosen to take a photo with announces over a speaker through a microphone which guests turn it is to take a photo with the maid. On the stage the maid asks the guests what pose they want to make together for the photo. If the camera used to take the photo is occupied the maid will engage in light conversation while waiting for the camera to be free. The photo taken is a polaroid photo that after it has been take and it has revealed itself. The maid will then spend time and draw on it with both the guests name and theirs and other small messages or drawings to personalize the photo.

When the customer buys drinks of food that includes maid interaction the maids will be very much engaged in conversation and interaction with the customer. During my observation I saw some maids engage in long discussions and conversations with the customer. Making cute gesticulations and facial reactions along the way. The maids laugh and tell funny stories with the guests. And listens to the guest when they talk to them. When interacting at the table maids will stand at the opposite side of the table creating a distance between them and the guest. Sometimes other maids will join in and interact with the guest together. This can happen when they guest have asked for a group photo with more than one maid, or the maid seemingly knows the guest from before.

During my observation many of the guests seemed familiar with the maids. Indicating that they had interacted with them along time. Other seem to go the just to interact with specific maids. During spare time a maid might walk up to a guest they have meet regularly and spark up conversation.

The space is very small and cramped, so maybe around 20-30 guest can be there at any time. Meaning the feeling of being there is very cozy. The place is very pink and covered with pictures in photo frames of different maids. The café is also very pink with pink being on all the wall and furniture. The photo frames and heart shaped mirrors are framed by a gold frame. At home Maid cafes own music performed by maids working at the cafes are constantly playing in the room, only interrupted when the guests call out for a guest to come take a photo. Other occasions when the music is changed is when there is someone's birthday and they have requested a commemorative photo with the maids. during this time all the maids gets in for a photo and one maid or a guest holds a sign saying happy birthday. While one of the maid songs sings happy birthday. Everyone at the shop is made aware of the guest's birthday and many people clapped along when they maids congratulate them.

My feelings after today

The space when you enter feels very welcoming, everyone greets you and you are led to the table. Today I order just a coffee with cream on top (I know but it was kind of good). This drink had no maid interaction beyond when receiving it the maids makes a hearth shape with their hand along with the guests and move it from side to side while saying moe moe kyuu (cute, cute, kiss). After that the maids left me alone. At first it was fine but after a while the usual atmosphere of engagement and joy faded away. And I felt left out of the created atmosphere blasting from the cafes speaker and screaming from the maids interacting with other guests around me. As well as with the decoration. Clearly if the guest does not engage in the menu items that means maid interaction the maids will not interact with the guests. Frankly it did make me feel left out and the cozy atmosphere of the space feel apart. Clearly these cafes require you to engage and work with the maids to allow you to engage with the place's atmosphere. The maids are still welcoming and happy to help when you gesture to them

for help (I spilled water and got the attention of a maid to get help). The maid helping me was Marble and even though just last week she had signed my ranked-up member card and taken a photo with me she did not recognize me. At the time she had been really friendly and used my name but this time she clearly did not recognize me (clearly because she interacts with so many customers). Clearly the theatrics of the place broke down for me at that moment. But at the same time, it didn't change much as you are very much aware of the superficial relationship formed with the maids. Still not engaging with the maids meant being left out. Meaning as a customer you are left out and makes you want to spend a bit more money to get the engagement from the maids that you go there for. Perhaps this happened because the place was very busy. I went in the evening, so a lot of guests had gotten off work and visited the place. Perhaps if I visited at a less busy time there would be more time to interact with me. Also, as I was sitting there, I was taking notes. Which might have deterred the maids from engaging with me.

At the place there were a mix of both men and women. Almost half and half. And when I entered and left there were more women there to join.

Maidremin secret base store

Visit day (1/2 – 2024) time 14:35-15:40

I visited the café early in the day. The place had few customers. One person was sitting at the bar counter, two groups of people were sitting at the tables. One group I found out later from some small talk when they were about to leave, were a group of S-Korean men on a trip. The place decor reminded me a lot of that of a bar. In the center is a bar counter, where customers can sit. There are two sides opposite of each other where the guests can sit. In the middle is a walkway that leads to the kitchen. The maids walk here to talk to customers on the bar counter. Or to fetch items from the kitchen. They also use it when they walk to the kitchen to discuss or perform work that customers should not see. Or just to find a nice quiet space to do some tasks. The place is very green and compared to most other maid cafes (including other Maidremin locations) is lacking a lot of pink. The place has a lot of chalk board advertising drinks and food, and snacks. Further giving the atmosphere of being at a bar. The place also

has a stage, but instead of having all the seats facing it only the table area is facing the stage. The bar area feels more separated from it. And while you can easily see the maid performing on the stage it is equally easy to ignore it. As you need to turn 90 degrees to see it. The place is cluttered in the back with stuff. They have video light mirror that you attach your phone to. For what I assume is social media posts. They have confetti cannons and porcelain/glass decorations of a cat and a moon, dolphins, and such that you can buy. The walls are covered in tapestry of the maids. These tapestries are also for sale to the customer. On one of the wall photos of the maids hang and a customer can purchase one of their like. All the time music was playing in the background. The music playing were songs from the Maidreamin idol groups songs. The music was only interrupted when one of the maids performed a dance for everyone. They explained what was happening, and in the sound bit, a Japanese explanation was happening that the maid talked along to. During the dance the maid did a lot of cute dance moves and gestures. They would put with their face and make many more cute expressions. The place is very green. At this place there were not many guests only a few. They sort of came and went. And when I left the place there were really no one else there for the moment. Probably more guests would get there in the evening but at that time it was very sparse. Still, this meant that the maids were more talkative with me and happy to bring up a discussion on many different topics such as languages and what my research was about.

The maids here today were very talkative and asked me about if it was my first time, explained the menu and system to me in English. Until one of the other maids asked me something in Japanese and I responded back in Japanese. The maid felt embarrassed over their English and complained about me not telling her earlier. Even though I personally thought it was fine. Later on the maid told me about how bad she was in English (only scoring 3/100 on one of her English tests). When I was there, I was taking notes in the open. At times the maids would come up and ask me about it. At these moments I would explain why I was there and what I was researching. I would mention that I did not write down names and I was just observing what was happening. The maids would use this as a way to start conversations. Having something obvious to go deeper into conversation with. Another part was them complimenting my Japanese. Something many Japanese learners will experience in Japan. Even for the smallest of Japanese they know. There were only two girls working the floor when I was there. They performed a lot of work taking care of the customers. Talking to them (me included) taking photos with them, serving them, explaining the system, personalizing the Polaroid pictures. And keeping up the atmosphere as much as they could. I ordered a cold mocha coffee and when

the maid came out with the coffee, they made me do the usual ritual of making a hearth with my index fingers (pekfingrar) and then forming it with the full hand and saying *Oishikunaru, moe, moe, kyu!!!* (美味しくなる、モエ、モエ、キュー!!!) Meaning “make this delicious cute, cute, kiss”. Which is a common ritual at maid cafes especially the saying moe moe kyu. Which is something the customer and maid always say when they are served a drink or food. It is to imbue the food or drink with cuteness in order to make it delicious. It is also a way to have the maid and customer interact together. And is part of the experience sold at a maid café.

They seemed very young and a little nervous. One of them, who later preformed the dance, was nervously practicing the dance she was about to perform. Putting it up on her phone and practicing the moves when the time allowed it. She from the body language in my interpretation seemed nervous about doing it. But clearly preformed it many times before and while on the stage did it very well. If to my untrained eye, it only took a few seconds to get into it. During the dance the other maid stood a bit back and clapped along to the dance, creating some rhythm and support. Other guests were nodding along. 2 men had bought glow sticks that they used to cheer on the maid.

At the place maids a who are off duty will enter and leave the place in casual clothes through the front door. Greeting the working maids or saying goodbye to them out in the café area or conversing in the kitchen. At the door there is a small curtain that acts as a separator from where the maids can go to their changing room and in into the kitchen. In some way this might be observed to break the atmosphere of the place. But I would say that the causal expression of friendships and openness helps adding to it. The maids seem to help out in the kitchen while also having a person in casual clothing work there as well. The maid who was about to dance, right before it was prancing around from the kitchen and out getting everything ready for the dance. Further adding to the notion of being a littler nervous. The maids working there had either dark black hair or colored hair pink hair. Something I've noticed with maid cafes is that the maids tend to have hair of many different colors.

My own reflections

The place was very empty and while you felt it to be calmer. It also lends itself to make you feel more welcomed by virtue of the maids spending more time with you. The place is so

small that talking to other customers is not that difficult. Either when they leave or if that also sit at the bar counter. The place has a cozy vibe that is hard to break. The maids being more casual makes it feel more like you are hanging out with friends at a café. Where they are working. And you drop in and out of conversation with them. They also complimented my eye color which was nice. One of the maids recognized me from my visit there last week when I was scouting out locations for data collections. They asked if I would return, and I told them that I would probably be there a lot this month. One other customer seems familiar with the maids and spend quite a bit of money to be there. Getting themselves a little present (you can buy a present or get it in a combo set meal). Being at this place I really felt involved in the atmosphere. While I kept to myself the maids talked to me and I could feel the mood through them. The maid's interaction allowed me to take part in the atmosphere. And had I not interacted with them back in kind, I would have been left out of it. Clearly an example of the collaborative nature of creating affective atmosphere in the works, I think.

I felt good after the visits and the conversations were fun and interesting. The visits felt like a success, but I could probably have taken more notes. However, this time I was interacting with the maids a lot more so when ever they would come up to me I would stop taking notes and engage with the maids. I made sure to let them see my notes and read them if they liked of the place, I took them at.

Maid Dreamin secret base

3/2-2024 13:24-14:25

The place was empty when I arrived except for one other customer. The same maid from Thursday (maid A) greeted me and one other (Maid B) I had meet the week before. They both recognized me and greeted me in. the place was empty so as I made an order the maid started talking to me. The other customer brought two different folders one after the other and showed maid B it. She was excited and commented on the pictures he had collected. Some were cool and others were cute. She spent a lot of time talking to him about it. Later, Maid B started to talk to me and asked what I was doing. I told her I was doing research for my master thesis. And when they later asked what I was writing I helped translate my notes for them. Some of

the maids were head bands reminding of old 1800 French maid costume while others had head bands with animal ears on it.

On the bar table there was a folder listing all the performances the maids could do for a fee. It was placed with chopsticks, wet tissue, and tissues. One of the blackboards listed all the events that was happening at the café that month such as cosplay events, maid birthdays, or performances. .at this maid café you order by QR code. It takes you to a website that greets you with a maid explain the place and system. Here you can pick language. Japanese and English.

I will make a note of going on the 8th for a maid's birthday event

The maids took turn going outside and handing out flyers trying to get customers to get in to the store. It is cold so on top of their maid customer they get a big winter jacket with the maid dreaming logo on top of it. One maid (maid A) got a group of 8 men to go to the café. Before she entered a regular came in and told the maids the group of men was coming.

The large group of men were loud and boisterous. Calling the maids Nesan- They did not seem used to maid cafes. The age range of the men seem to be mid 20s- to 40+. They all awkwardly went along with the maids. They took orders and waited along. Talking quietly along each other or observing the room and maids. My guess is that they were first time visitors. At one point they played rock paper scissors to decide something. They all seemed embarrassed by the place but at the same time enjoying it. When they got their drinks, the maids instructed them on the oishikunari moe moe kyu ritual that they do at the café. The men laughed and some try to get out of it, but the other men made them go along with it. They all did it together and then laughed together as they all cheered after. The men took a photo and jokingly went Moe (in place of cheese) as they took a photo with the men. They all were loud for a bit after the drink and then slowly quiet down. the maids did not interact with the men when all their drinks were getting ready. The large group were left to themselves. While the maids stuck to talking to the guests at the bar counter. I think it is causing the large group interaction can be hard to manage. And they usually want to talk to the friends among themselves- while us sitting there on our own kept to ourselves and when not talking to a maid looked at our phone.

At the location today there seemed to be some smoke in the air from the kitchen as my eyes got very runny and hurt a little from the fry ooze coming from the kitchen.

On one of the walls there was a poster advertising the opening for a Maidremin café opening in Hokkaido.

There were some problems with the ordering system and at first it didn't look like I had ordered a drink. And then I got a bill for two drinks.

The guest informing about maid A bringing in a lot of customers had been there before, and I think I had seen him there last few times I was there.

The maids say something when your food is done but I have yet to catch what it is they say.

On the table there are bills sitting in a plastic glass. Customer can pay 100 yen for these and used it to tip the working maids.

At home maid café Akihabara cultural center L

3/2-2024 16:36 – 17 :36

To day when I went to got to the usual 3F there was an extensive wait time of over an hour when I got there. So, in the end I ended up going to another one of the same brand of café next door. Because there was supposed to be a shorter que time. However, I ended up waiting 30 min + to get in. To get in, in the case of a que, at home maid café has an electronic que system in which people can go and do something else until it is there turn. One floor had a que time of 346 min (main store 7F). I waited outside the entrance to the Left café at the Akihabara cultural center café. Here is also where they have the gift shop. The floor has a bit red carpet. In the speakers there is at home maid café's own music playing. And across the walls are photographs hanging that you can buy for your collection. They are protected by glass cabinets and displayed in rows. It seems like a lot of regulars coming here are collecting photos of and with the maids.

While I was waiting in the que, I started to reflect on Akihabara. Walking the main streets with anime shops you are bombarded by the more than a dozen different kinds of maids form different maid cafes trying to get you to come in to their café. Mixed in with this you have restaurant, concept café's, otaku goods (figurines, anime stuff, Vtuber stuff, trains, Gundam)

mixed in with multiple shops selling computer and tech stuff. Or a big number of different kinds of wires.

Despite having to que for a long time and a lot of people still queuing when I got in, there were a lot of empty seating in there. So they held off on letting people come in, my guess is that they let people in in waves so that multiple people leave around the same time and multiple seats become available. During the day there were maids in more fluffy and causal clothing. Or rather different style of maid suit, as there was a special event going 'on, I got my drink and had order a caramel mocha caffe which included the service of having a maid draw on top of your coffee. I asked the maid to draw a rabbit and they were happy to do so cause they had rabbit ears on their customer. one maid got surprised when they found out that I can speak Japanese and did not dare to speak with me at first. But open up a little once they knew. Once again showing that when the maids don't know I speak Japanese they tend not to come and talk to me.

Once I had gotten my drink the maids ignored me for the most part. It wasn't until I snapped the attention of another maid and asked if I could buy a photograph with the maid that suddenly the maid had much more to talk to me with. When it was my turn to take a photo, the maid announced it over the speaker while giving me eye contact. Once I got up there she spoke to me and ask what pose I wanted and I asked her about her favorite pose. And we did what she suggested being a "good student one". This was inspired because she had noticed my notes and asked me what I was doing, so I explained to her that it was for my master thesis. So she suggested the pose. At this point the camera was a little occupied by a maid taking a photo of herself to give to a customer. So, the maid had to make some small talk with me. So, we talked about all the places I had been to of the at home maid cafes. When I asked a maid to take a photo with me she acted very happy that I picked her. I wonder if they are instructed to act like that.

I did see one maid sit down opposite to a customer (I think it was a maid) talking to them. One maid was causally dancing a little for two customers. There was the usual split between men and women visiting the café. One man was showing a maid a photo from his phone. Two men one after each other, took a photo with all the maids that were dressed up that day. One man had gray hair while the other looked much younger. Some maids were telling stories while customers were listening and commenting a little on the their story.

In the kitchen it seems like 4-5 people were working serving for the two cafes.

The maid next to me when writing on a photo made a mistake and called herself baka in a semi cute way with a gesture. One maid asked what I was writing and when I showed her so that she could read she noticed I wrote in English and put her closed hand on her head and pose as if she didn't know and moved on. One of the maids do look European so I am wondering how she got started at the maid café.

When it was time to leave the maid I took the photo with asked me to return and talk again (maid name Kyo) . Also, this maid did at one point, related to bunnies, excitedly showed me her newly made nails. On these nails she had a bunny motive

At home maid café main store 7F 17:50-19:00

Today I went to the Café with my friend. It was her first time at the maid café. She wasn't confident with her Japanese so the maids explained how the café worked to her in English, the maid did her best going over each part some times looking at me for guidance or approval that the English translation was correct. When we were seated the maid Banban happily told us that she had a special gift to my friend. She had a prop letter that she opened and in there was a nice little letter that she read out loud to friend. The letter was just introducing and welcoming her as a guest to the maid café. When finish reading the letter she gave my friend a pink membership card. The member ship card is the guests "licence of their majesty". And is used to keep track of how many visits a guest has done by creating an account and linking it to your card. This allows the customer to look through their app how many times they have visited the café. When and where . and for each visits they get a point and after five visit the guest reaches their first mile stone and become a silver card member unlocking a feature to see which maids are working were on a specific day at a café.

At the café we orded a desert combo and I went a head and gott a shake drink. When ordering this driknk the maid specialy prepares it ofr you "picks colour" and in front of the guest they

will shake the drink while chanting with the guest. The ryming scheme is simple of just the different cute words normally used. It went along the lines of *moe moe, shaka shaka, kyu kyu, wan wan, nyan nyan, oishikunare, moe moe kyu!!*. After wards the maid asks you to guess the colour of your drink. I guessed pink and it was pink. The maid will also let you pick the colour of the straw for your drink.

Included in my desert combo was a photo with the maid. They showed me the big photo album and me and my friend picked from the maids working that day. My friend picked the maid that seated us that day was banban. I picked April to be the maid I took the photo with. When it was my time to take the photo. They announced it over the speaker in English for me. and April introduced her self in English for me. At that moment I did the same and told her that Japanese was fine. And we kept up the conversation in Japanese. April asked me what pose I wanted to do. And I asked her favorite. She wanted to make cheek hearts. After the photo I left the stage and sat back down. When April was done writing on the photo she came over to me and handed over it to me in a big photo protector cover showing all the premium to legendary maids on it. She brought up conversation about my English and asked what I was writing down in my note book and I explained what I was doing to her. She also asked about me and my friend and kept up a nice friendly conversation. In this conversation I brought up that through my research I had visited many different maid cafes in Akihabara. And among them was an isekai maid café by the Akihabara station. She brought up she had also been there and we shared a laugh talking about it and the fact at this place they make you wear bunny ears. To me this felt like a very genuine conversation, even if it was short and arguably a form of small talk. It had all the aspects of the maid being curious and asking about me and what I am doing. And us sharing a moment of sharing experiences of a place we both had visit at different times. The talk didn't need to be longer and it didn't need to be deeper cause we both shared in it's context. To some extent I wonder if these are some of the moments that up lifts and maintain the space of the café. The short but connective interactions with the maids. Where they show interest in you and what you are doing. Asking questions about you and allowing you to share about yourself so that they can keep the space up and maintain it . as a way to maintain the space.

Today I went to the evening events of maid dressing called hyper. It cost more to go but the seating includes one drink. It's 2100 yen roughly. At this time the focus is a bit more on drinking alcohol. As such I sat down and ordered a rum and coke. (and then drank water until they came out with a shot brick and offered it to every guest (for a price). Today there were not many other customers there for the whole duration of the stay. It was me and one other man there. There were 4 maids I met there, one ended their shift around the time I got there, and another Ichi started when I got there. One of the maids recognized me as a Waseda student. And talked to me and let me in. This maid Inari was very nice and talked with me a lot during the evening. Similarly when I was outside trying to get people in to the shop, another maid Uma who ended her shift half way through mine kept me company. Uma would occasionally look at my notes and read them. Seeing what I was writing and looking it up. Just out of curiosity. I couldn't tell if they understood. But there seemed to be no issue about it.

When I got my rum and coke the ritual this time was different. Instead of going oishikunaru moe moe kyu. The maid and I went "Let's go Maiddressing, Kampaig!!!" and then I got to drink my drink. Rum and coke was among several drinks available to me to pick from included in my sit down fee. It was all from non-alcoholic to alcoholic drinks. Except for coffee drinks.

In the location the lights were turned on. The space used was that of the bar counter. The difference for hyper mode was that they had a disco ball spinning.

When the Ichi came in and started her shift she talked about something scary, I could not tell what she was talking about. But she quickly recovered and stepped in to her role as a maid in her casual clothing. She stopped at first to introduce herself to me. In English at first going "Hello Master" but another maid told her that I could talk Japanese, and when she said hi I said Konichiwa. She switched to Japanese.

In one of the corners when I arrived one of the maids Pun was livestreaming. She was sitting in front of the camera talking to commenters in the chat. As the time went on and it was time for her to stop streaming she went and fixed the camera towards the stage. and she and 2 other maids Ichi and Inari joined her and danced with Pun. They dance a practiced choreography with simple movements that in many ways enhanced their cuteness. They kept this up for a whole song so 3 min. before they started dancing they goofed around by the camera. Practicing one of the dance moves where they stretched out their hands in a sort of

giving motion as if they were holding a brick and giving it to someone. One of the maids also took the time to fix her lipstick in front of the camera. Once the dance was done Run-Chan took the camera for a little bit before they closed it down.

They put rabbit ears on me, they were playing K-pop on the speakers. But when they performed the dance they switched to a maidreaming song. As it was Valentine's Day the maid gave me chocolate and explained to me the Japanese tradition of women gifting people chocolate on Valentine's Day and then on White Day the gifted person is expected to give 3 times the chocolate received on Valentine's Day back to the girl. As it was happy time the maid gave me a small amount of nuts. At which point I was trying to drink water.

Around 40 min into my stay one of the maids asked me if I had heard an Akebi 48 song. And started playing it for everyone. One maid with the mic came out and offered everyone a shot. I could not really fully tell what she was saying over the mic. But I decided to join in, and took a peppermint shot (found out after it was 15% alcohol in it). The maids told me to wait with drinking it and offered it to the other guest there. The man was hesitant but got one as well. After that all the maids came out and made us go together with a "let's go maidreaming Kampaig!!!" after which we were supposed to drink it together. I gave the other customer a nod and raised my shot to him and he did the same and then we took it. Only issue was that mine was frozen so I told the maids. The maids noticed and finished first the sort of shot singing/dancing and celebration first. When the shot time was over the girls went up and gave me a finger heart with their index finger and thumb and when theirs touched mine they said Kyu and onomatopoeia for a kissing sound. So effectively the same as saying kiss. Then when the music had died down Ichi took my shot and warmed it in her hands for maybe 2-3 min before handing it to Inari who held it until it was no longer frozen. At which point I finished drinking it. I felt quickly the effect of the alcohol but nothing too serious. I continued talking to the maids. Warming up more to them with conversation. Eventually my time was up and they asked if I wanted to extend my time. Extending your time meant buying a new hour sitting fee and drink for 2100 yen roughly. I said no, however I was genuinely tempted to buy more time as I had had a wonderful time there. The maids were full of life and very fun to be around. One maid even asked me before I left if I wanted to buy a photo with a maid, after thinking a little I decided to take one with Inari. I went to the stage and I was asked what pose to make. We made the cheek hearts. I went back and started packing my stuff together

paid the bill and waited for Inari to finalize the personalization of my photo. She asked me where I was going after that and I told her I was going home.

I truly got wrapped in the moment today. One of the maids kept complaining to me jokingly that I wasn't eating the chocolate she gave me. So she started to fake cry and repeatedly told me she wanted me to eat the chocolate. At this time I joked back with her and offered her a chocolate because *choco tabetai* could also mean "I want to eat chocolate" given the context. Of course it was related to me not eating the chocolate that fast. But she quiet down and took the piece of chocolate with a smile and a little laughter.

The space was warm and I forgot that I was actually at a maid café. I felt like I was spending time drinking with my friends. And money was not really of concern for me in the moment. I forgot drinks cost money and I got to focus my focus on the maid, and the conversations I had with them. I thought them a little Swedish words. I laughed a little at their jokes and when one maid asked me about what I was doing and what my dreams were. I told her I wanted to do a phd. I didn't know the name in Japanese but the other customer was kind enough to translate it for me and give the word in Japanese. To this one of the maids got a little surprised but also acted like she was impressed. She got a big grin on her face and rubbed her hands together. A bit like she was jokingly saying I was a catch or someone of interest. It was hard to say as I could not read the boddly language that well. But it was as if she got interested by the prestige. All in a joking tone. It was a very fun time and I am starting to understand the joy of being regular at a place where people recognize you.

Extra note about this day (17/2)

When I walked home that evening one thing hit me as I was passing the back streets where many maid cafes and shops are placed in Akihabara. There were a lot of police and security guards placed out along the street keeping an eye out. I wonder if they were there to keep the maids standing on the streets safe or maids walking home. Or if they were there to ensure the streets were not over crowded or people were being roudy there.

Reflections and thoughts (2024- 02/17)

Maidrening and at home maid café are very similar. However the bar to socialization is somewhat different at these places. Maids will mostly talk to you if they recognize you or you have payed for some service such as taking a photo or getting some food at at home maid café. Maid can however talk with guests for a rather long time. Conversations between customares and the guests have from my observations been often very engaged. Especially when the customare has been to the café more than once.

Personally I have felt this as well. The joy and relaxation of meeting someone familiar is very strong at these places. If you meet a maid that you have a good conversation with. It makes it easy to form a relationship with them. For instance Going to at home maid café on 15/2-2024 after 16. I went to floor 3 with a friend of mine. It was her first time. As such she went throught the ritual of receiving your members card. (receiving a letter, and then having the maid explain the member ship, writing on the card name or pseudonym, and thus being initiated for future visits. During the visits the maid Sakura whom I meet during my first visit to the floor during my location scouting. I took a photo with her that time and had a lengthy conversation that was very fun. During this visit I was nervous to talk to her as previous maids I've meet more than once at home mad café usually has forgotten about me. But with the encouragement of my friend I decided to take a photo with Sakura this time as well. As Sakura was not serving us and thus wasn't naturally having a conversation or interacting with me. When it was my time to take a photo she recognized me and asked if this was the second time. Which was relieving. We had a quick talk and took the photo. I went back to my seat and she came quickly to hand me my photo. We talked form there with her and my friend and my friend professed to me being nervous seeing her again cause I didn't think she would recognize me. To which Sakura responded that she ofcourse she recognized me since we had a very long conversation last time we saw each other. We talked some more and honestly it was really nice to be recognized.

In addition to my worries of not being recognized by Sakura I also felt weird asking for a photo with her without talking to her before hand. It to me felt creepy and in other situation would be grounds for stalking behavioure. Of course this view has been informed to some extent by the conversations I have had with my fellow classmates (all non Japanese). Who discusses concerns about stalking related to maid cafes. Especially the feature unlocked in the at home app when I became a silver member. Where I can see which maid are working at which place during the day. Since this app allows the user to see if a maid is working at a café. I used the app that day to find out who was working at the café that day and made my decision to go to

floor 3 because I knew Sakura was working. I felt a little shame that I wanted to see Sakura again. Which to me is actually such a weird experience since it is only now that I have visited maid cafés I have felt the want to meet a particular worker. There is a sense of familiarity and connection from that makes you forget that they are working there. A conversation held is not something you think of as part of a transaction of money. The buying of drinks, food, and photos are the transactional part. But by extension the maids will talk and interact with you in conjunction (addition) to serving you food, drinks, or taking a photo with you. Meeting the maids again means opportunity to follow up on recent events, or continuations of old conversation. Maybe share news of shared interests.

One thing I find very often when talking about maid café's with people who have not visit them or talking about it with people in general. Is that the maids as just people is forgotten behind the commercialization of people and services, the uncomfortable sexual undertones, and the difficulty I find at time to explain maid café's to westerners. It might be me and my fear of how I am perceived by non-Japanese and Japanese alike. But it can be rather difficult to discuss. As many conversations either comes down to valid concerns of safety, but without answers. Or talks about the perceived invalidity of the relationship between the maid and the customer. As the money to some extent is perceived as a hinderance.

However from my experience as customer, the payment is still but that is always felt through the consumables such as photos off and with the maid, and the drinks and food. When conversing with maids you will either have a short and quick one as they are serving you, or them asking where you are from (since I am European and look like it) or a long and deep one. Deep here meaning going in to a specific topic . or just extensive where the maid will talk to you about many topics and spend time with you as they have time (shared with other guests). This is helped by buying photos. If a maid is not the one serving you. And you want to interact with a specific one. The best way to do it is to buy a photo of them or with them. As this means the maid will talk to you on the stage, but also when handing over the photo. If it is a photo of the maid they will personalize it in front of you meaning you can talk to them. Or if it is a photo with them they will often stay after giving you the photo and talk with you. I think this is where the commercialization of the interaction actually take place. You pay money to take a photo, the photo then becomes an opportunity for the maid to talk with you. This is of course part of the service, and intention. But it explains why people can spend so much money on photos. Since it gives an opportunity to talk to them maid. This also lifts up the atmosphere of the café as

it encourages guests to interact with the services and become part of maintaining the atmosphere. I also think this is partially done because maids at at home maid café are often busy attending to one customer at a time so they don't usually have the time to just talk. On the other hand often many maids will congregate by the cashier or kitchen window to process payments, fetch orders, or just talk among others. They also check with the people working as cashiers who registers people in to the café. I think that going forward I will go to cafés to some extent based on if I know a maid working there. For example Sakura. And to me it is more because I have had a very good interaction with Sakura now that I have met her twice and especially the first time. That while I would not call us friends or any close relation like that, a relationship has formed based on the impression left by her on me. And the positive feeling associated with that interaction. And I think this is the core of maid café fans who go there to talk to specific maids. The sort of connections formed based on the interaction. And the expectation that you be able to have that on multiple visits. Or maybe that is how I feel about it. And the more familiar I get with maid cafés and the places the more comfortable they become as I always know what to expect. There are few if any surprises and the atmosphere formed there is always welcoming. And the maids act always happy to see you.

In contrast to at home, maid dreaming secret base has a lot of social interaction without the same high barrier of payment to achieve it. When I have visited this place the atmosphere is much more relaxed and the maids always interact and talk with me. As such they learn I speak Japanese fast and we have conversation quickly. Most of the time the conversation feels friendly but distant. But they recognise you more easily and thus conversation is easily started. I think however the one time I fully understood the joy of this place was 2/14-2024. When I went in the evening for the happy time. The maids working that evening were really nice and funny. The conversation was flowing and the atmosphere created was relaxing. I can't rule out that the alcohol didn't affect this but the maids carried forward for me. I remember the maids warming my shot with their hands as a "special maid service". I felt really at home and forgot I was at a maid café. The maids were always doing something and kept the flow of "fun" going by talking with me, dancing for their live stream. Or just filling the air with conversation among themselves. It was also them asking me for instance if I knew an Akebi song before coming out with shots. That reminded me of how I would interact with a friend if they didn't know a song I liked. It was the first time I ever felt like extending the time because I had so much fun. And felt so comfortable with the maids. Of course, they capitalized on this by asking if I wanted to extend the time or take a photo. Which I agreed to take a photo happily

just to have a memorabilia for the evening. The alcohol might have helped me loosen my guard but the atmosphere the maids made by all engoldening me, asking me questions, talking about interests such as maid cafes. Allowing me to engage in the atmosphere as much as them that made the evening much more fun.