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'Otaku' men find themselves much sought after

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Shukan Asahi (June 15) takes us to a “retro café” in Tokyo’s Nihonbashi where nine men and nine women are engaged in light banter. It looks like – and in fact is – a “*konkatsu* party,” a party for people in search of a marriage partner.

This one’s a little different though. First, the talk is remarkably animated, with few of the awkward silences that generally bedevil these gatherings. Secondly, though the language is unmistakably Japanese, a Japanese eavesdropper might have difficulty following the conversations. What’s “BL”? Or “*fujoshi*”?

BL means “Boys Love” and “*fujoshi*” are women who like manga and anime with BL themes. Are we oriented now? This is marriage-hunting among the *otaku* – those who, mostly with pride, shun as much as possible the physical, three-dimensional, living, breathing, sweating world and indulge instead their all-absorbing interest in *manga*, *anime* and computer games.

Otaku by now are so pervasive they are almost mainstream. The word is understood worldwide. Abroad they are “cool Japan” personified. And yet at home, not everyone takes to them. Cool they may be, but women looking for mates have tended to look elsewhere. *Otaku* themselves – the males anyway – were notoriously skittish when it came to the opposite sex.

Not anymore, says Shukan Asahi. All of a sudden *otaku* men find themselves much sought after. One sign of changing times: organizers of the Nihonbashi café event report 30 applicants for every place available. Another: within two hours, five couples have formed and gone off on their own. That’s more than half, and better by far than the 30% rate typical of non-*otaku* *konkatsu* events.

Why are women, *otaku* and non-, lately reversing themselves on the desirability of *otaku* men as marriage partners? According to experts consulted by Shukan Asahi, it all boils down to a shift in women’s aspirations. Once they demanded “the three highs” in a man: high academic background, high income, and high height – better a tall husband than a short one. That’s out

now. In instead are “the three *heis*.” The character “*hei*” means average, mediocre, ordinary. The three *heis* are ordinary appearance, average income, and mediocre lifestyle.

It was the bursting of the economic bubble in the mid-1990s that deflated the three highs, and the 2008 Lehman Shock that inflated the three *heis*. The Lehman Shock brought Japan to the edge of economic collapse. It was a shattering experience. High living suddenly came to seem like skating on ultra-thin ice. Better lower one’s sights, thought many women. A man with a modest salary is less likely to throw his money away. A plain appearance means other women will leave him alone. An unimposing lifestyle keeps a man content with the humdrum but satisfying pleasures of home and hearth.

Otaku men may be unimposing and unthreatening – but does their immersion in virtual and cartoon worlds leave them time and energy for husband- and fatherhood? It’s a point of concern, women concede. Hardcore *otaku* might not fit the bill. “*Otaku light*” is what they hope for.

Questions

1. Did you already know the expressions “BL” and *fujoshi*? Do you know any other *otaku* expressions?
2. Have you ever attended a *konkatsu* event? What kind was it? How was it? Do you think these kinds of events are good ways to meet future spouses?
3. What other kinds of *konkatsu* events do you know about? Do you have any good ideas for such events?
4. Are you an *otaku*? Do you know any?
5. Would you be interested in marrying an *otaku*? Why? Why not?
6. Do you agree that women’s expectations have shifted from the “three highs” to “three *heis*”? Why? Why not? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
7. Women – if you could choose one “high” for your spouse, which would it be? Why?
Men – if you could choose to have one “high”, which would it be? Why?
8. Do you think *otaku* can be good husbands and fathers? Why? Why not?

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