

Hanna Yoshida
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Biographical Essay

“Dress formally for tomorrow’s team dinner,” my boss said to me as I was about to leave the company building one Thursday night at 10pm. I paused, staring at him, hopefully with an unreadable expression.

I had been trying to challenge the traditional Japanese culture that encourages women to dress "feminine" by wearing skirts, blouses, and heels. This specific practice wasn't about professionalism. It was about how "attractive" you appeared to the male colleagues, as described by the Japanese slang term "moteru," which means "to be popular, ostensibly with the opposite sex" (Maree, 2013). The more appealing you were, the more influential you became to these men. I had been resisting this societal norm, choosing to wear a simple shirt and pants to work (after all, I work in logistics). I also was inherently trying to protect myself, having grown up in the U.S. and constantly being warned about the dangers of “attractive” clothing. As my boss walked past me, he added, "Remember, think about what you'd wear to a wedding reception."

On my way home on the crowded subway, I considered my clothing options. The majority of my dresses were either sleeveless, which is considered inappropriate for office settings in Japan, or were overly formal. However, since my boss had placed such a strong emphasis on formality, I decided to wear a black flower-printed dress paired with leather loafers.

The next day, I woke up an hour earlier than usual. I checked my emails and responded to messages that came in throughout the night from coworkers. I spent extra time with makeup, even going the extra mile to put in contacts and curl my hair. Usually, I was so busy with work that I only wore minimal makeup and glasses, with my hair pulled back into a messy bun. My

boss had been commenting that I should dress more like my only other female teammate, who has long, wavy hair and always wears feminine skirts. However, since I felt uncomfortable receiving feedback on my appearance instead of my actual work, I had been brushing off those comments. Today was the day I was determined to reverse his negative bias against me.

I walked into the office, feeling confident and good about myself. My boss was late, as usual, having gone out drinking with coworkers the night prior. As I sat at my desk and started going through my projects, I heard a loud laugh behind me. There stood my boss, casually dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. My other team member was standing next to him, also in a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals. I stared at them, confused, when my boss continued to roar with laughter:

"I can't believe you actually managed to dress up. I thought you wouldn't be able to."

To him, the time I spent worrying about my appearance and getting ready was merely a joke, another topic for him to laugh about with his coworkers. They were all going to go around saying, "The quiet, nerdy American girl actually can clean up well."

Embarrassed, I sat through our weekly team meeting, with me being the only one dressed up. When it was my turn to report about my weekly progress, my boss remarked, "Your words are more impactful now that you're dressed nicer. You should consider dressing up more often if you want to be heard better." I finished my progress report and quietly sat down. I wanted to go home, but the night was just beginning.

Japan, along with other Eastern cultures, has a strong culture centered around drinking and post-work activities. Ironically, even though my company is US-based, my boss and coworkers maintain a traditional mindset, making team drinking events mandatory. Fortunately, as I was not one of my boss' favorites, I was able to avoid the daily drinking dinners. However, some of my teammates were dragged to attend nightly outings, clubbing, shot bars, and even

hostess lounges. As Nemoto mentions in their article, sexual workplace interactions are normalized in many Japanese companies, including: “(1) taking clients to hostess clubs...; (2) [female workers] playing the hostess role at after-work drinking meetings...; and (3) repetitive or threatening sexual advances occurring during normal working hours” (Nemoto, 2010).

Our team dinner began at a casual izakaya, a Japanese-style pub (Ohnishi, 2012). There are many unspoken seniority rules at Japanese team dinners. As the youngest member, I was expected to serve as the hostess of the table, serving the plates that come, ordering refills for empty drinks, and sitting at the entrance seat, which was typically the loudest and busiest. I barely ate while my boss and team members downed pitcher after pitcher of beer.

Once our time was up at this izakaya, our team was subtly coerced into bar-hopping, where my boss started playing drinking games, probing into our personal lives. It was part of the culture that making crude jokes and sharing personal details would strengthen the team. My boss continued making subtle jokes like “Oh! If you don’t answer this, remember how it will affect your next evaluation!” Shot after shot, we felt compelled to drink because it was critical to keep pace with the seniors at the table.

After the third stop and with my boss passed out at the table, it was finally our sign to be able to go home. Some of my colleagues who were close to him helped him out of the bar, offering to join him for a midnight snack at a ramen stall. It was 2am at this point. I grabbed a taxi and headed home, costing me 8,000 yen out-of-pocket. While surprisingly cheap for a 2am cab ride, it was still the price I paid to be humiliated inside and outside of work and to reveal embarrassing personal information that could potentially be used against me. “At least no one laid a finger on me,” I muttered to myself as I got out of the cab and unlocked the door to my cozy Tokyo apartment - my sanctuary.

Sources Referenced

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