Introduction

The Japanese healthcare system is among the most advanced worldwide. Life expectancy is extremely high, infant mortality extremely low, the use of state-of-the-art medical technology widespread and the health insurance system almost universal.\(^1\) In addition to modern biomedicine, the Japanese healthcare and insurance systems also support the Japanese form of traditional Chinese medicine, which includes acupuncture, moxibustion, Japanese massage, \textit{jūdō}-therapy (a non-invasive therapy for injuries of the musculoskeletal system), as well as about 150 different traditional Chinese prescription formulae. ‘Spirit possession,’ however, is not accepted as a valid medical diagnosis and its treatment is neither offered nor paid for by the official system. People considering themselves or their friends and relatives possessed, therefore, have to seek advice and treatment outside of the official healthcare system.

Individuals and organizations offering the treatments required to heal spirit possession, on the other hand, traditionally relied on word of mouth to advertise their services, yet in the past twenty years or so the Internet has come to supplement and intertwine with word of mouth in many areas. This study therefore explores the Internet as infrastructure for medical pluralism and decision-making in cases of spirit possession in Japan. That is, it analyzes the role of the Internet in providing information for people who consider themselves, their friends, or relatives possessed by a spirit, and in connecting these people with those who offer the necessary treatments. To this end, I first define ‘spirit possession,’ its most common symptoms and treatments and explain my methodology. I then look at what kind of information and treatment may be found on the Japanese Internet, that is websites, weblogs, and social networking sites either written in Japanese or with a domain registered in Japan, by those suffering from spirit possession. The analysis focuses on structural factors influencing the access to information and treatment, the role of entrepreneurship for those offering treatment and epistemological frames for the legitimacy of purifications and exorcisms as treatment for the symptoms attributed to spirit possession.
The Internet as infrastructure for healing

### Setting

Spirit possession is defined as the entry of some spiritual being into a physical body other than its own. Possession can be voluntary or involuntary, beneficial or malign, informative or disrupting, depending on the nature and the intention of the possessing being and the person or object possessed. Belief in spirit possession can be found in many cultures (e.g. Boddy 1994; Dawson 2011; De Antoni and Piraino forthcoming). In Japan, belief in involuntary spirit possession by the spirits of animals, deceased humans, or low-ranking spirits has a very long tradition and many old sources as well as modern novels, manga, and films narrate that people became very ill or suffered from accidents or bad luck as a consequence of spirit possession (e.g. Ishizuka 1959; Pörtner 1996; Staemmler 2009: 30–134). There is a theoretical difference between ‘entering spirit possession’ during which a spirit enters a person’s body and ‘affecting spirit possession’ during which a spirit negatively affects a person without actually entering the body (e.g. Sasaki 1996: 243–253). My research indicates that to those suffering from symptoms caused by interfering spirits this distinction is irrelevant, although treatments differ slightly.

The symptoms associated with spirit possession today can be physical as well as psychological or behavioural. Biomedicine has taken care of most physical problems that would in premodern times have been attributed to spirit possession, so today the physical conditions that may be attributed to spirit possession are those biomedicine cannot explain: ongoing unwellness, inexplicable stomach aches or headaches, loss of energy, and so on. The psychological symptoms, similarly, are feeling not quite oneself, gloomy, irritable, or downcast (De Antoni 2019). The behaviour of someone possessed would be unusual or inappropriate. Symptoms for spirit possession, thus, are abnormal and/or inexplicable conditions, incidents or behaviours which are not life-threatening as such, but unpleasant, disturbing, and repetitive. Because they are inexplicable and incomprehensible, they are perceived as frightening (Staemmler forthcoming). Entries in online question-and-answer (Q&A) forums as well as testimonials on spiritual healers’ websites show that people thus affected would typically first see one or more medical doctors—less often psychiatrists because of the stigmas connected to mental disorders—before possibly finally associating the symptoms with spirit possession or spirit disturbances.

Treatment in cases of spirit possession has traditionally been offered by Buddhist or Shinto priests, by practitioners of Shugendō—a religion centring on mountain asceticism—or by individual healers comparable in their initiation processes and work to classic shamans. In the late 1800s treatment of spirit possession by people not affiliated to temples or shrines was forbidden by law. Today, priests, especially priests belonging to esoteric Buddhism, individual spiritual healers and some new religions offer relief from afflictions caused by spirits. In addition to advertising their services through word of mouth, most of these have recently set up websites or weblogs to inform about their services, worldviews, and so on. These websites and weblogs are a significant part of what people will see when they use the Internet as infrastructure to find help in cases of spirit possession.

### Methodology

Because so many different symptoms may be attributed to spirit possession, research on how people use the Internet to find treatment can only begin after people have for themselves at
least tentatively identified spirit possession as a possible cause for their suffering and have started searching the Internet for remedies and healers that might be able to help. To comprehend the perspective of health-seekers, I emulated common patterns of gathering information on the Internet through search engines.

The three search engines most popular in Japan are Google (market share of about 75 per cent), Yahoo (22 per cent) and Bing (2 per cent). In order to depersonalize the search engines, I used Safari’s ‘private window’ and emptied the browser history before the searches. Additionally, with Google I set the region to ‘Japan’ to get the results someone in Japan would get. I conducted the search twice, at different days of the week and times of the day, to compensate for possible technical complications.

I selected two common, synonymous terms for spirit possession, ‘hyōi’ (憑依) and ‘hyōrei’ (憑霊), and the term ‘reishō’ (霊障), which can be translated as ‘spiritual disturbance’ or ‘spirit-related disorder’ and is used very frequently to denote problems with some unspecific or yet unidentified spiritual cause. These are the terms people suffering from symptoms they tentatively attribute to spirit possession or spirit interference are most likely to use. I combined each of these terms with common terms for the desired treatment, that is exorcism (除霊 jorei or 凍霊 jōrei) or purification (お祓い o-harai), and used these nine combinations as string queries for the search.

Of these nine queries, I saved the top ten results. This leads to a theoretical maximum of sixty different results per query, although there was considerable intersection between dates and search engines, especially Google and Yahoo (cf. what follows), so that the final result of the search were 161 individual webpages, some of which belonged to the same website or weblog. I weighted these search results with factors accounting for search engine popularity and position among the top ten search results to calculate their prominence or visibility among similar websites.

I used the forty pages with the highest visibility value as key data to answer my questions about the Internet’s role as an infrastructure for medical pluralism and decision-making. For the perspective of those providing help and treatment for people suffering from spirit possession I additionally draw on results of my long-term research about spiritual healers’ self-representation on the Internet which analyses the websites of over 200 spiritual healers, including about sixty offering exorcisms.

**Search engines and online visibility**

Before looking at even one of the sites recommended by the search engines it is worth noticing that Google and Yahoo hold enormous power over the visibility of—and hence access to—information provided on the Internet. The search results of these two most popular search engines are almost identical. This is particularly so since Yahoo Japan began using Google’s algorithms and databases in January 2011. This adds extra influence to Google, which already holds three quarters of the search engine market. I weighted the search results with factors reflecting the respective market share of each search engine highlighting the effect that not even the top result in Bing has a visibility close to any of the top results in Google to say nothing of the combined influences of Google and Yahoo. As thirty-seven of the 161 URLs were found through more than one of the queries, the total visibility values for individual URLs ranged from 2,538 to one, with a few URLs ranking very high—those found by Google and Yahoo through more than one query—and a large number of URLs ranking very low. They are thus barely visible to most Internet users despite their position among the top search results with Bing. As visibility on the Internet immediately connects to access numbers and hence determines how often a site is
The Internet as infrastructure for healing

visited and its content is read or viewed, this dominance of one search engine is extremely significant.

The forty webpages with the highest visibility belong to thirty-four different websites, which include those of eleven individual healers and two companies offering advice and treatment for people suffering from spirit possession. Four pages are from websites of three different new religions, another six from private blogs and two from associations interested in spiritual topics. The results also lead to two threads in a Q&A forum, three books—two giving spiritual advice and one a collection of horror stories—plus one research report, a Buddhist temple, an entry on Wikipedia, a site listing power spots, an online magazine, and a company offering divination apps. None of these or, in fact none of any of the 161 results, lead to representations of the official healthcare system, to a biomedical or psychological clinic or institution or to any other site rejecting the possibility of spirit possession or the practice of exorcism. Only a few of the results suggest that the concept of spirit possession and the practice of exorcism/purification might not be convincing for everyone, whereas most results confirm the possibility of spirit possession or disturbance and the appropriateness of exorcism or purification as its treatment.

Online information and offers of treatment

The content of the forty most visible webpages can roughly be classified into pages merely informing about spirit possession and pages and websites offering treatment in addition to information. Among the informing webpages are weblogs of individual people that contain many entries about various topics, including a random entry about spirit possession. Chikyū nandemo Kanteidan, for instance, is a private blog by a right-wing activist and spirit possession is addressed only once. Other private blogs focus on spiritual topics and address spirit possession as one of these, similar to some organizations informing about spirit possession as one part of their coverage of various religious and spiritual issues.

With the exception of a blog entry humorously narrating how the author’s grandmother had once exorcized a spirit by throwing fistfuls of salt at her possessed daughter, all of these describe symptoms that might point to spirit possession which are identical to those described earlier. They recommend a variety of things that might help to prevent or treat possession—salt, water, prayers, light, and so on—and they simultaneously suggest to see a spiritual healer and strongly caution against possibly fraudulent and harmful spiritual healers. I will come back to this later.

Webpages offering information about but not treatment of spirit possession also include Wikipedia’s comparatively short entry on spirit possession with two sentences about spirit possession and medicine in Okinawa, the newsletter of a spiritual circle featuring a long article about spirit possession from the perspective of British spiritualism, an entry in an online spiritual encyclopaedia closely linked to a company employing around fifty spiritual healers, and a research report about contemporary spirit possession by anthropologist Andrea De Antoni.

Sites offering both treatment and information are those of spiritual healers, new religions, and a divination company. These, too, illustrate how to recognize spirit possession and disturbances and what to do about them. They also explain why the treatment they themselves offer is superior to all others. The new religions found here include Kōfuku no Kagaku, one of the largest new religions of Japan that was founded by Ōkawa Ryūhō in 1986 (Baffelli 2011; Winter 2012). Whereas temples, shrines, and many individual healers explain spirit possession and its treatment in accordance with traditional concepts, new
religions explain them based on their own doctrines, which may differ considerably from traditional concepts. Köfuku no Kagaku, for instance, similar to other religious movements founded since the 1970s, emphasizes one’s own responsibility for health and wellbeing and hence the need of repentance and self-reflection in order to clear oneself of evil thoughts and, by extension, of evil spirits.20 Mushiakyō is a new religion in the tradition of Sekai Kyūseikyō whose main ritual is laying on of hands referred to with the common term for exorcism ‘jōrei’ (usually transliterated as ‘johrei’). Contrary to exorcism, however, this jōrei/johrei is said to purify (jō) body and spirit (rei) of pollutions, rather than purify (jō) the body of an intruding spirit (rei).21

The company offering treatment of spirit possession is one of several online divination companies. In these, spiritual healers or diviners can be contacted by telephone and consulted about various problems and impending decisions. Fees are 5,000 to 6,000 ¥ (30–35 GBP) for a twenty-minute consultation and divination. Because the main service here is consultation by phone, rather than face-to-face exorcisms, the explanatory text downplays the frequency and severity of spirit possession and recommends the effectiveness of easy home remedies—mainly the avoidance of certain areas and negative thoughts and the use of salt and crystals.22

The main providers of exorcism prominently visible on the Internet are individual self-employed healers. Fifteen of the top forty search results are from healers’ sites or blogs. This is partly due to the large number of individual healers offering exorcisms, but it also points to their entrepreneurship as I point out in what follows. Most spiritual healers are women—although those offering exorcisms are often male—over forty who either work from home or offices or meet their customers, also mainly women, in coffee shops. Healers’ backgrounds are manifold, ranging from traditional Japanese religions to all varieties of new spirituality. Their services consequently also range from simple twenty-minute divinations to complex aura-readings and purifications, although a typical session lasts about one hour and includes a fair amount of counselling for a fee of 10,000 to 15,000 ¥ (see also Gaitanidis 2010). Individual healers seem to explain terminology, symptoms, and mechanisms of spirit possession and exorcisms in more detail in their websites or weblogs than those of other services they provide, such as divinations or memorial rites. They do this presumably because exorcisms tend to be less known and more expensive than common divinations and memorial rites. They may also involve the patient more directly and physically than other treatments23 and hence need more explanation to put customers at ease. The higher the customer’s financial and physical risk the more essential it is to have trust in the healer and their treatment. It is also noticeable that most healers recommend consulting a medical doctor before requesting an exorcism or purification.24

Mediatization and information provided online

From entries in Q&A forums and testimonials published on healers’ sites it becomes quite obvious that professional spiritual help is not usually the first option when faced with the diffuse physical and psychological symptoms eventually attributed to spirit possession or interference. Many narrate that they went to see medical doctors first, but that these could not find any cause or cure for the problem. Other reports suggest that people talked to friends and relatives before turning to the Internet or professional help. As with other illnesses, too, the process leading to professional treatment thus involves various steps, such as waiting for
the symptoms to recede, consulting friends or relatives, trying home remedies and over-the-counter medication before consulting a professional, first biomedical then spiritual, therapist (Kleinman 1980: 49–60).

The information about spirit possession that is offered on the Internet can be arranged according to this process. Most webpages in my data first explain the symptoms of spirit possession thus confirming—or refuting—the sufferer’s suspicion that the problems are indeed caused by spirits. Especially weblogs often proceed to give advice on how to deal with the problem by oneself and how to prevent future attacks, much as biomedical healthcare facilities advise people how to avoid and treat colds or other minor afflictions. Recommendations reflect the bloggers’ worldview and range from purifying baths and salt, reverence to ancestral graves, to positive thinking, and laughter. If these home remedies should prove ineffective, bloggers recommend the consultation of a specialist, often either a Buddhist or Shinto priest, or a spiritual healer, although a healer should be selected with care as many are said to be fraudulent. Websites of those offering treatment as well as information, on the other hand, at this point recommend their own services and treatments as superior to all others that are rejected as ineffective. The entry on spirit possession in the weblog *Spiritual Nori*, for instance, is a lengthy, easy-to-read text with these (sub)headings:

‘A story about spirits: why they take possession, how to exorcise them. . .

1 People who become possessed easily and people who are not possessed easily
2 Spirits like people who are similar to themselves
3 How does one know if one is possessed?
4 What should one do when one is possessed? How exorcisms are done
5 It is important to visit one’s family grave
6 One last point’

Thus, as Friedrich Krotz pointed out, recent mediatization has led to the inclusion of the Internet into decision-making processes. Online and offline sources and means of communication increasingly intertwine and the Internet has come to play an important role in information seeking and communication (Krotz 2001: 34–35). The Internet supplements offline sources and widens the scope of possible communication partners, especially for topics that are intimate, embarrassing, or marginalized, such as belief in spirit possession. As the symptoms that may be attributed to spirit possession are vague and diffuse, it is difficult to find comprehensive information about them online. Most people seem to take spirit possession into consideration only after having unsuccessfully consulted biomedical doctors. The choice between biomedical and spiritual treatment—similar to that between offline and online sources—is thus not so much an alternative but something to supplement the deficiencies of the former with the latter.

The Internet may be accessed—usually via search engines—to find information about symptoms and treatment as well as information by and about treatment providers. This information is readily available, published for a mass audience as bloggers tell the world about their lives and interests, new religions present their doctrines and rituals, and spiritual healers advertise their services. Word of mouth that had formerly been the key provider of many recommendations has become supplemented—yet, as comments show, not substituted—by the Internet. Information has become easily accessible. It is, however, not necessarily reliable or balanced as search engines employ algorithms rather than medical
experts and unwanted information or advice is much easier ignored online than in face-to-face communication.

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s extensive website includes two separate sections on health and mental health respectively, in which some symptoms are described and advice on treatment and self-help, and so on are given. It is noticeable that illnesses that are either topical (measles), widespread and dangerous (cancer and coronary diseases), or tabooed (addictions and mental disorders) are given widest coverage as people can be expected to look for information online for these more than others. This website, thus, provides access to information that is less stigmatizing or embarrassing when obtained anonymously. The Japan Medical Association also provides information on various illnesses, including headaches, ataxias, and stress-related symptoms, but excluding mental disorders. Neither of these, however, mentions spirit possession. Thus, they are of little help to those considering themselves possessed.

A second online source of information about spirit possession and possible treatments are Q&A forums. Here information is not yet available—although questions and answers are archived and remain accessible to later users—but created on demand. These online forums permit access to innumerable ‘latent ties,’ which Caroline Haythornthwaite added to the strong and weak ties of Mark Granovetter’s network analysis. Latent ties are those ‘for which a connection is available technically but that has not yet been activated by social interaction’ (2002: 389). Online Q&A forums supplement questions to and advice from friends and relatives (strong ties) with questions to and advice from a host of unknown, often anonymous people (latent ties) who might be able to provide the requested information. Thus, in addition to retrieving already existent information from websites and weblogs, some people suffering from symptoms they attribute to spirit possession enter questions in online Q&A forums asking for help and advice. Many of the answers given to advice-seeking questions in these forums are friendly and supportive despite their anonymity (Staemmler 2018b).

The importance of entrepreneurship

The significance of successful search engine optimization, the exclusion of spirit possession and its treatment from the official healthcare system, as well as the recurrent warnings about fraudulent spiritual healers and the ongoing scepticism of new religions require a significant amount of entrepreneurship from those who work as professional spiritual healers and hope to convince people of the effectiveness of their treatments or religious doctrines.

Visibility in search engines results pages is crucial if one wants to attract customers through one’s website. However, websites of individuals are more difficult to optimize for search engines than sites of institutions because they are smaller and rarely linked to from influential sites. The site with the second highest visibility value, ranking third and fourth with Google and Yahoo both times, is that of a Buddhist temple. However, this temple was founded by its current chief priest and, rather than being a traditional temple with a parish and a focus on funeral rites, this priest is in fact an ordained individual healer offering Buddhist retreats for individuals and groups as well as consultation and exorcisms for people suffering from spirit interferences and possession. This website is professionally optimized for search engines. The page containing explanations about spirit interferences, spirit possession, and exorcism, for instance, competently uses the relevant search terms repeatedly not only in the text, but in headings, links, names of images, and items in the menu. Its rank among the first few search results is, thus, no coincidence, but the result of professional web design.
The Internet as infrastructure for healing

Similarly, the website with the highest visibility of my sample is that of an individual healer similarly optimized for search engines, although it lacks many elements usually found on the websites of individual healers to present them as trustworthy: information about the healer or healers themselves, location and photos of the healing salon, testimonials, and so on. Because of the vastness of the Internet, therefore, individual professionals wanting to attract customers through their websites first of all need to achieve high ranks in Google’s result pages.

Prices for exorcisms charged by individual healers range between 20,000 and 180,000 ¥, yet have an average of about 30,000 ¥, that is approximately 180 GBP. Although Japanese incomes are comparable to those in Europe and North America, an exorcism is not, therefore, a cheap treatment, a treatment moreover not covered by the official health insurance and with no guarantee of success. Additionally, ‘spiritual sales,’ that is incidents in which people have been intimidated into purchasing goods or services for very high prices to avoid alleged misfortunes caused by supernatural agents (e.g. Sakurai 2009: 64–101), have received some media coverage and individuals who decide to undergo a spiritual treatment, therefore, need to have some trust in the organization or healer they consult. Online Q&A forums, consequently, contain questions asking for recommendations of or at least criteria for trustworthy spiritual healers (Staemmler 2018a). These threads with descriptions and comments about healers, thus, complement self-representative websites and weblogs by healers and new religions. Together they constitute a bilateral digitized word of mouth.

Since the 1995 sarin gas attack by the new religion Aum Shinrikyō, new religions are viewed with extreme scepticism in Japan, although many have existed for many decades and many are involved in a large number of charitable and social activities. Of the new religions
in my sample, Kōfuku no Kagaku, once a fierce rival of Aum Shinrikyō, merely explains its reasons for spirit possession and implicitly recommends one of its founder’s many books and membership to deal with it. The Murasakino branch of the Izumo Ōyashiro-kyō similarly recommends a personal visit and talk at the branch in addition to prayers to its main deity, a major deity from the traditional Shinto pantheon. These two new religions, albeit totally different from each other, share the benefit of a famous name—of the organization and of an ancient deity, respectively—to imbue them with an aura of respectability. Many individual spiritual healers, on the other hand, explicitly and often quite prominently reject any connection with any religious organization. An exception is, for instance, Sasamoto Sōdō whose Seishin Sūkeikai had been registered as a religious corporation in 1985, that is well before the Aum incident. He seems to use the official status as a religious corporation to distinguish his practice from those of other individual healers who lack any formal recognition. A careful analysis of spiritual healers’ websites reveals that demonstrating the healers’ trustworthiness is one of their essential tasks because several incidents involving fraudulent healers received high media coverage, yet particularly because the financial and emotional risk of commissioning a ritual—especially a ritual of exorcism—is so high that trust in the healer is an essential prerequisite.

Epistemological frames for spirit possession and exorcism

As opposed to, for instance, fillings to treat decayed teeth, exorcisms, and purifications are not widely accepted treatments of fatigue, depression, moods, streaks of bad luck, and so on. Whereas dentists, thus, merely have to advertise their own particular clinic, healers and others offering treatment of spirit possession have to prove the effectivity of exorcism as such in addition to advertising their own particular practice. The two strategies typically used are doctrine and experience. New religions and individuals offering treatment of spirit possession usually first explain why they think spirit possession occurs and why, consequently, their own particular treatment is so effective. The main reason given for spirits to take possession is that they are unhappy. Spirits that take possession cannot forget grudges, died a premature or violent death, suffered in life and are unable to realize they have died, and so on. Contrary to demonic possession as taught, for instance, by the Catholic Church, most spirits, thus, are not absolutely evil, but extremely miserable. Explanations differ somewhat, but generally spirits are said to take possession of people that are spiritually sensitive, have low self-esteem, happen to be where the spirit roams or are weakened because of illness, pregnancy, bereavement, or the like. Consequently, many healers argue, it is inappropriate to merely expel or exorcise a spirit as it would remain unhappy and take possession of someone again. Rather, it is necessary to listen to the spirit’s story and its reasons for taking possession and then to console it, promise requested rituals and assist it in travelling to the world beyond or in achieving Buddhahood. Many healers refer to the former as ‘jorei’ (exorcizing the spirit) and to the latter as ‘jōrei’ (cleansing the spirit) and argue that only they themselves are able to perform this difficult latter task and thereby treat the sufferer effectively. Through these explanations, thus, those offering treatment of symptoms attributed to spirit possession simultaneously explain why spiritual treatment is effective and why their own treatment is most effective of all.

The other means of demonstrating this is the use of testimonials, that is allegedly true accounts of former customers. Apart from the fact that testimonials are good for search engine optimization as they repeat important key words and, if added gradually, contribute to updating the site or blog, testimonials are also important as illustrations of a healer’s work, in giving examples of the kind of problems a healer treated, in entertaining readers more than theoretical
explanations do, and in offering potential customers a means of identification and hence an incentive of consulting this healer. As testimonials are always positive, they infallibly narrate that the treatment provided by the healer was indeed painless and effective.

Reading through threads in online Q&A forums that discuss spiritual healers and spirit possession it is noticeable that they often take place within a closed frame of reference, in which contradicting voices are scarce, ignored, or rejected (Staemmler 2018b). Repeatedly outlawed in the late 1800s/early 1900s, exorcisms by healers not affiliated to any religious institution survived clandestinely and can be found across the borders of doctrines. Discourses also take place in the amorphous area of new spirituality in which boundaries between individual religious creeds are blurred. Traditional concepts of spirit and spirit possession, novel concepts of new religions and individual healers, those of British spiritualism and new Japanese spiritualism, including Reiki (cf. Stein, this volume), exists parallel to each other. Some recommend one, others recommend the other, but there is very little discussion about the validity of the belief in spirit possession as such and hence very little discussion about the appropriateness of a spiritual treatment. Quite a few healers indicate that the afflictions attributed to spirit possession may well have other causes, which need biomedical or psychological examination and possibly treatment, and that this should precede spiritual treatment, but my sample contained very little outright rejection of the notion of spirit possession. Severe criticism of such beliefs and ridicule of believers do exist, yet they do not surface if one accesses the Internet through search engines with the string queries used in this study.

Because of this closed frame of reference, two problems arise. The first is the validity of the treatments requested and offered for the afflictions that they are meant to cure. The placebo effect combined with the cathartic and therapeutic value of a long talk with an empathic listener may undoubtedly lead to a positive effect of some sessions of exorcism if they are conducted carefully and the underlying cause of the problem responds to such a treatment. However, there are physical and psychological diseases that cannot be healed through rituals and talks alone. The case of one of the questioners in a Q&A forum shows quite vividly that the number of possessing spirits that molested him grew with every healer he consulted because every healer diagnosed a different spirit to be the cause for the voices in his head. Only one of those answering his question recommended that he should see a medical doctor or psychiatrist. All of the others attempted to answer his question about the effectivity of a purifying ritual from different perspectives within the frame of beliefs in the possibility of spirit possession.

This example is typical for many threads about healers and spiritual problems in Q&A forums. Answers suggesting explanations that do not conform to the questioner’s basic beliefs are neglected or rejected. It is much easier to ignore or click away an unwanted piece of advice in an online forum or to leave an unconvincing website than it is to ignore or leave someone offering this information or advice in a face-to-face meeting. Thus, although it is necessary that a healer’s interpretation of an illness convince the patient, there is the danger that people suffering from what they interpret as spirit possession do not need to take differing views into consideration if they use the Internet as their only infrastructure.

The second problem that can be addressed only briefly here is that of addiction to divination (uranai izonshō). This ‘addiction’ is frequently discussed in weblogs and Q&A forums, albeit less in medical or psychological literature. There seem to be quite a few cases—prominent in the media was that of comedian Nakajima Tomoko—of people who are described as, or who consider themselves, addicted to healers and the relatively easy and reassuring advice they provide. The financial burden of frequent consultations can in fact be considerable, especially as some divination companies offer easy payment by credit card, and the psychological
consequences of such a dependence on someone’s advice can be quite severe. Thus, when healers warn that not all problems are caused by spirits and that customers should consult a medical doctor first, they not only ensure that physical and psychological disorders are taken care of and that they do not violate the laws which prohibit medical treatment by people not trained and officially certified as medical doctors, they also guard people against ‘addiction’ to spiritual healers—and they guard themselves against accusations of luring customers into addiction.

**Conclusion: the Internet as infrastructure for those afflicted with spirit possession**

The preceding analysis has shown that the Japanese Internet provides those who consider themselves possessed by a spirit with a wealth of information and offers of treatment. Because the healing process of spirit possession resembles that of other afflictions and includes gathering information about the problem and its treatment, and because recent mediatization has turned online sources into an everyday commodity and obvious source of information, the information and treatments offered online have become an important element in the coping strategies of those considering themselves, friends, or relatives possessed. However, as search engine market share, search engine optimization, and entrepreneurship decide about a webpage’s visibility and hence accessibility, the sources that people notice and access first are not necessarily those which are most correct, purposeful, and up to date. Additionally, the most visible online sources move within frames of reference that leave little room for heterodox—in this case, sceptical and biomedical—voices.

It is generally argued that source credibility and trustworthiness are essential issues for online offers of information and services. My long-term project is showing that this is especially so with matters involving high risks, such as one’s health and expensive rituals. Because the sample for this chapter analyzed only the most visible websites and weblogs, however, it focused on those placing more emphasis on search engine optimization than on presenting themselves as trustworthy—that is on showing that they are competent, that the information and services they provide are correct and purposeful, and that they provide this information or offer these services with the best of intentions for the reader or customer. This would be different with a sample that also included sites not primarily designed for search engine optimization and hence far lower down in search engine results lists. As most Internet users are unlikely to view later pages of search results, however, these potentially more trustworthy self-representations, which typically include information about the authors and their motivations, prices of services provided, contact data, and so on, may easily be overlooked.

In recent years, the Internet has become a key source for those seeking help with all aspects of health and illness, from public hospital websites to intimate fertility awareness apps (Pasche Guignard, this volume). Because, however, spirit possession is not recognized as a diagnosis by the (Japanese) official biomedical healthcare system, no information or treatment is offered online by any biomedical practitioner or institution. The afflicted, hence, find only discussions within frames of reference that accept spirit possession as a valid explanation for physical, psychological, and behavioural disorders, and treatments by healers who, although often sincere and engaged, are not subject to any form of quality control and who may not be affiliated to any religious or healthcare organization. As most Internet users are likely to access only the first ten results or so, they are additionally likely to discover only services offered by those whose online self-representation was designed for search engine optimization rather than for demonstrating the trustworthiness of the author and the quality of the content.
This is a case study of the results one would find if one searched the Japanese Internet for an exorcism or purification to cure spirit possession. The Internet has become ubiquitous in many countries where biomedicine dominates the healthcare systems, yet cannot cure or explain all illnesses. Thus, the results of this study can, I contend, with due modifications be transferred to other cultural settings as well. There, too, providers of alternative healthcare will vie for the attention of Internet users, explain their aetiologies to promote their specific treatments, and strive to convince potential customers of their trustworthiness as the services they offer are not covered by health insurance and are marginalized by the majority healthcare providers.

Notes

1 See Sakamoto et al. (2018) for an account of Japan’s healthcare system including the issues related to high life-expectancy, low birth-rate, and expensive technology that the system is currently facing.

2 This paper is part of my long-term research project about Shamanism on the Japanese Internet kindly sponsored by the Horst and Käthe Eliseit Foundation. Although the actual sample was collected specifically for this paper, the methodology is similar to other parts of this project (e.g. Staemmler 2013, 2018a, 2018b, forthcoming).

3 Online Q&A forums are another frequent source for information and advice online, but a detailed analysis of the discussions archived there is beyond the scope of this paper.


5 The concrete URLs of the search engines used are those of the Japanese versions: <google.co.jp>, <yahoo.co.jp> and <www.bing.com/?cc=jp>.

6 These were Tuesday, 19 February 2019 at 9 pm Japanese time and Monday, 25 February 2019 at 4 pm Japanese time. Results for both days should be quite similar as search engines draw on their regularly updated archive of websites rather than trawl the Internet at the very time a search is started.

7 The other common term for spirit possession, ‘kamigakari’ (variously written 神懐かり, 神かかり, 神懐り, etc.) had formerly also been used to refer to involuntary spirit possession, whereas ‘hyōi’ and ‘hyōrei’ had been very technical terms used only by anthropologists or scholars of religion. But recently ‘hyōi’ and ‘hyōrei’ have become more widespread and ‘kamigakari’ is used mainly to refer to possession by deities (神 kami) rather than mere spirits.

8 The difference between ‘jōrei’ and ‘jorei’ is subtle. Although most health-seekers are likely to regard the terms as synonymous, some healers distinguish between them (cf. below). ‘Oharai’—sometimes also written 御祓—on the other hand traditionally refers to a Shinto ritual that would purify people from all kinds of impurities and contaminations, including contact with death or blood.

9 With Google, I had to change the settings to twenty results because collections of images and videos are counted as search results. I ignored these and results beyond the top ten.

10 That is, three search engines, two search dates and ten results each. I ignored all sponsored results and advertisements.

11 Because Google holds seventy-five per cent of the search engine market, its results were weighted with factor thirty-seven (half of seventy-five is thirty-seven point five, but I restricted factors to integers), Yahoo results with factor eleven and Bing results with one. The very first result was weighted with factor ten, the second with nine and so on to factor one for the result on the tenth position. Thus, the maximum visibility value a search result could theoretically get was 980 if it ranked first twice with Google (740), Yahoo (220) and also Bing (20) (cf. Staemmler 2013: 184–185). The thirty-seven results found through more than one query of course achieved the combined visibility values of all these queries so the highest visibility value a webpage achieved was in fact 2,538. I add visibility values to the URLs of the sample in {braces}.

12 Strictly speaking, the search engines find particular pages within websites. I used these pages as well as the sites containing them for the analysis. All of the first forty sites were found by either Google and Yahoo or by all three search engines, twenty-two of them were found by more than one query.

13 The total of 161 unique URLs found by the three search engines for the queries described above include sixty-five found by both, Google and Yahoo, as opposed to only twenty-three found by either Google or Yahoo. Seventy-three were found by Bing but neither Google nor Yahoo.
Although the average visibility value for the 161 sites is 302, the median is only forty, indicating that a significant proportion of the sample has very low visibility and only very few sites are very visible—and hence very influential.

All of the websites referred to in this chapter were accessed and partially archived for analysis between 26 February and 4 March 2019.

One of the questioners in Chiebukuro, for instance, asked whether purifications work. Both answers were somewhat sceptical (detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1036891575 {1}). The online magazine reported that a young singer and starlet tweeted that she had seen a spiritual healer (rather than a medical doctor) because of her persistent cough (abematimes.com/posts/2582752 {1,414}).

Check.weblog.to/archives/2168391.html {1,580}.


Happy-science.jp/info/category/spiritual-world/possession/ {980} and happy-science.jp/feature/spiritual-world/possession/ {865}.

On jōrei/johrei see also Staemmler (2011).

www.sion-web.co.jp/cafe/course/course08/ {809}.

See for instance www.tenkouji.jp/oharai/te-jyorei/ {2,481}.

See for instance manakahunasumahou.jimdo.com/霊障の浄化-浄霊/ {2,538}.

Quoted from: スピリチュアルライフ.com/2017/08/13/rei/ {880}.


Search engine optimization (SEO) specialists recommend this use of key terms and the source code of the site states that it was professionally SEO designed.

www.tenkouji.jp/oharai/te-jyorei/ {2,481}.


Sasamoto emphasizes that this registration had been granted by the regional government because it had recognized Seishin Sūkeikai’s ‘belief in deities and the positive achievements and focus on public interest of its salvation activities over the past ten years’ (www.ssks.or.jp/company). Especially this ‘focus on public interest’ (kōekisei) is essential in distancing Seishin Sūkeikai from presumably evil new religions as the 1995 incident has severely shaken public trust in the ‘focus on public interest’ which people had formerly taken for granted as a characteristic of any religion (Baffelli and Reader 2012). The Religious Corporations Law was promulgated in 1951 in order to allow religious groups to own buildings, conduct ceremonies, organise members and finances, and so on. Currently about 181,000 organisations, including 174,000 individual temples, shrines, and churches, are registered as religious corporations (Bunkachō, ‘Shūkyō nenkan Heisei 30-nen han,’ 33. Available at: www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/hakusho_nenjihokokusho/shukyo_nenkan/pdf/h30nenkan.pdf).

The analysis of trustworthiness is the main topic of the large research project upon which this paper is based.

For instance, manakahunasumahou.jimdo.com/霊障の浄化-浄霊/ {2538}; 霊能.com {1079}; and shinkyou.webcrow.jp/jourei.html {984}.

Question-and-answer threads about ‘divination addiction’; often address ways out of this addiction by people who want to beat it as well as by people who have succeeded beating it. There are, however, also threads using this ‘addiction’ as an argument against spiritual healers, indicating that perhaps part of the discussion has ulterior motives.
The Internet as infrastructure for healing

Bibliography


