

Japan's J-pop predator - exposed for abuse but still revered

• Published 6 March



By Mobeen Azhar

BBC News, Tokyo

*Update 7 September: This BBC report in March 2023 prompted other victims to publicly report their experiences of abuse by Johnny Kitagawa. It led to demands for an investigation into the agency and its founder's acts. Now, **the agency has acknowledged the abuse** with the CEO resigning on Thursday.*

Warning: Contains details some readers may find upsetting

Johnny Kitagawa was the architect of Japanese pop-idol culture. His male-only talent agency, Johnny & Associates, churned out hit-making boy bands and Kitagawa held the world record for the most number-one artists, the most number-one singles, and the most concerts produced by an individual.

But allegations of sexual exploitation dogged Kitagawa's career. These weren't just whispers behind closed doors - they were discussed in the national press and some were proven in a civil court. That didn't stop Kitagawa holding national treasure status to his last days. Even in death, he is revered.

"He is God," says a young man about Kitagawa on the streets of Tokyo. A lot of people in Japan feel the same. **Kitagawa's funeral in 2019 was a national event**. The then prime minister, Shinzo Abe, sent a message of condolence. Teary-eyed Japanese celebrities and boy band members performed a final goodbye at a memorial event in the Tokyo Dome.

For someone so famous though, there are only a handful of pictures of Kitagawa in existence. He rarely made public appearances, gave interviews or allowed photos to be taken of him. He also strictly controlled photographs of his stars. Four years after his death at the age of 87, their boyish faces still look out over Japanese cities from billboards and giant TV screens. With their hairless jawlines and floppy fringes, these J-pop idols don't just sell albums, they advertise anything from real estate to contact lenses.

It's as if the allegations of Kitagawa's sexual abuse have never really had an impact, despite the stories being around for decades. For a new BBC documentary, I've been looking at how denial and media silence allowed Japan's most powerful pop music mogul to exploit teenage boys for decades.



IMAGE SOURCE,GETTY IMAGES

Japanese news reports of Johny Kitagawa's death in June 2019

Thousands of boys and young men went through the Johny & Associates machine while Kitagawa was alive. All of them had direct contact with the man himself, who scouted and nurtured talent over a career spanning nearly six decades.

The system Kitagawa created allowed him unsupervised access to - and control over - boys. Known as "juniors", new recruits worked as backing dancers for other bands until Kitagawa decided they were ready to debut - and move into the world of managers and PR. That could take years.

Hayashi (not his real name) was 15 years old when he sent his CV to Johny & Associates. His first impression of Kitagawa, who he met at his audition, was that he was "kind and considerate". But things quickly turned.

Hayashi has never spoken publicly about his experiences before and is understandably nervous about recounting his ordeal.

Just a week after the first meeting, Hayashi was invited to stay at one of Kitagawa's homes, known as "the dormitory" because so many boys would sleep over. "After a while Johny told me, 'Go and have a bath.' He washed my whole body, like I was a doll," he says.

Visibly shaken, he recalls Kitagawa then performing oral sex on him.



Hayashi (not his real name) claims that Kitagawa abused him as a teenager

Hayashi told us the abuse happened on a separate occasion too. He says it was clear the other boys knew what was going on.

"They all told me, 'You have to put up with it or you won't succeed.' No-one around me had quit. Johnny was the only adult. So it wasn't a situation where we could talk to anyone."

As an adult, Hayashi believes this quiet acceptance was partly tied up with the boys' dreams of success.

"The boys that succeeded, thanks to Johnny, their lives changed the moment they entered the agency. I think they are very grateful. That's a different thing from those sex crimes. I have only lived in Japan and have thought it was a great country. But maybe I'm wrong."

Stories similar to Hayashi's have been reported before.

In 1999, two reporters from the respected weekly current affairs magazine Bunshun met a teenage boy who claimed to have been abused by Kitagawa. The boy joined the agency when he was at secondary school and the sexual abuse started soon after.

He introduced the journalists to other boys and young men who shared similar experiences. Their accounts tallied so well that the reporters were able to draw a map of "the dormitory" in Kitagawa's home, where much of the abuse took place.

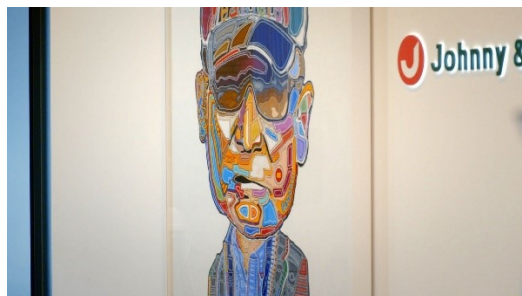
The investigation resulted in a series of articles documenting allegations from more than a dozen aspiring J-pop idols who said they had been sexually abused as teenagers. Some were as young as 12 at the time of the abuse.

The graphic testimonies include references to penetrative sex and coercion. In one account published by the magazine, a survivor says he believed that refusing Kitagawa's advances would be damaging to his career. "If you disobey Mr Johnny, your stage position will be compromised."

In another account, Kitagawa is said to have had sex with a junior in the boy's own home. "I wish I could forget. My parents put his futon in the same room as mine. That night he put my genitals in his mouth. You wouldn't believe it. My parents were sleeping in the next room."

Despite the damning testimonies, the series of articles barely registered in the public consciousness.

The co-dependent relationship between the Japanese press and the Kitagawa empire potentially goes a long way to explain why the story has been ignored.



An artwork of Johnny Kitagawa's face hangs in Johnny & Associates main reception

Securing access to talent from Johnny & Associates attracts viewers, readers, listeners and advertising revenue.

Promoting the agency's boy bands can win favours, including access to bigger, more established names. And saying something negative about the pop idols or the company could have the opposite effect - being cut off from the empire and all the revenue it can attract. Perhaps this is why most news outlets didn't even acknowledge the story about Kitagawa's misconduct.

When the reports were published, Johnny & Associates stopped Bunshun and its sister publications from speaking to any of their talent. And in 2000, a year after the magazine's investigation, Kitagawa and his company sued for libel.

The proceedings lasted for four years and featured testimony from many of the men who said Kitagawa had abused them as children.

The Tokyo High Court eventually ruled that nine out of the 10 claims made in the Bunshun article were in fact true, including the claim that Johnny was sexually abusing minors in his agency. Only the allegation that Kitagawa had provided them with cigarettes and alcohol was not found to be true.

Predator: The secret scandal of J-pop

Mobeen Azhar explores the suffocating reality of being a J-pop idol, the influence that Johnny Kitagawa had on the media and exposes the brutal consequences of turning a blind eye.

Watch on Tuesday 7 March, 21:00 GMT on BBC Two or on BBC iPlayer (UK Only)

But the verdict was met with more silence, and the libel case didn't lead to a criminal trial.

Kitagawa was never charged and went on to serve as the president of his company until he died in 2019.

The way their story was "stamped out" still makes one of the reporters, Ryutaro Nakamura, very angry. "I have been in despair about this for 23 years," he says.

But Nakamura also thinks prejudice played a part in the denial. "In Japan, love affairs or sexual relations between men - it's like people don't believe it," he says.

Japan is a nation that prides itself on politeness. Being impolite isn't just seen as annoying or rude, it's socially unacceptable. Many Japanese people believe that inconvenience to others should be avoided at all costs. This can nurture a climate in which raising concerns about sexual abuse is seen as burdening others.

Furthermore, the national age of consent is still 13. Up until recently, men and boys have been exempt from being acknowledged as victims of rape in the eyes of the law. The rape of a man was just not possible in statute before 2017. All of these factors contribute to a society in which the sexual exploitation of men and boys isn't just taboo, it's often invisible.

- **Japan aims to raise age of consent from 13**

-

It's no surprise then, that many of the men who experienced sexual advances from Kitagawa as teenagers still find it difficult to acknowledge that what happened to them was wrong.

Ryu joined Johnny & Associates in 2002 and was a backing dancer for 10 years. Like Hayashi, he has never spoken about his experiences publicly before.

"When I went to the bedroom Johnny came in and said something like, 'You've been so busy. I'll give you a massage.' He started from my shoulders and gradually went downwards. At a certain point it went too far and I said, 'Don't do any more.' He said, 'Sorry, sorry' and went to a different room." Ryu was 16 at the time. Kitagawa was in his seventies.

Today, as an adult, Ryu does not condemn Kitagawa. "I don't dislike Johnny. I love him. Johnny was really a wonderful person and I owe a lot to him. I still think that we were treated with great love. It wasn't such a big problem for me, which is probably why I can smile and talk about it now."



Former backing dancer Ryu refuses to condemn Kitagawa, and says he owes him a lot. Other former juniors we spoke to defended their old mentor.

Ren was with Johnny & Associates until 2019, when Kitagawa died. He remembers his introduction to the firm fondly.

"When Johnny & Associates first contacted us, my mum was in tears of happiness. My family thought, 'Wow he can earn that much.' We weren't rich. It felt like a dream," he says.

Ren, who now works in a bar in Osaka, says he understands the transactional nature of the relationship Kitagawa had with some of the aspiring stars. "There were rumours that if that [sexual harassment] happened you'd be successful," he says.

When asked if he would have complied with Kitagawa's sexual demands in exchange for a career, he responds, "My dream is to become famous so I think I would have accepted it."

Today, Johnny & Associates remains a hugely powerful agency in the world of J-pop, and Kitagawa is still celebrated as its figurehead. A giant artwork of his face - based on one of the very few photos of him - hangs in the reception of the Tokyo headquarters. The current company president, Julie Fujishima, is Johnny's niece.

After multiple requests for comment, Fujishima issued a statement: "Since the death of our former representative in 2019, we are working to establish highly transparent organisational structures adapting to the times in compliance with laws, regulations and strengthened governance with impartial experts. We are planning the announcement and implementation of new structures and systems in 2023."

She did not directly respond to the allegations of sexual abuse.

There has been no public acknowledgment that Johnny Kitagawa sexually abused boys and young men. Many men don't want to talk about their experiences at all. As a result, we may never know how many of these aspiring J-pop stars were sexually abused.

"For the survivors to go public is a very courageous thing," says Nobuki Yamaguchi, one of the few therapists in Japan who specialise in helping male survivors of sexual abuse.

"Japan has a culture of shame. If you have a personal problem, you don't talk about it."



Therapist Nobuki Yamaguchi: "The first step of recovery is to really acknowledge that abuse has happened"

But that stigma and silence can be exploited by abusers, he says. "Sexual abuse makes this special bond. That's what grooming is all about. Those are the things that make sexual trauma so complex and so confusing," he says.

"The first step of recovery is to really acknowledge that abuse has happened."

For many survivors of Kitagawa's abuse and for Japanese society at large, this first step is still to be taken.

*Predator: The Secret Scandal of J-pop is on BBC Two at 21:00 on Tuesday 7 March, and is **available on BBC iPlayer***