

Honkin' on Momo

- Ask JD if they ever participated in any high school challenges
- Ask JD what they know about
  - Suicide games

So Momo, let's honk on **Momo** for a minute. First, I would like to offer a preemptive apology.

The first topic I chose for this podcast happened to feature a lot of **Japanese vocabulary**.

I will **try** my best, but I do not speak Japanese, other than a couple terms you hear in **anime**, and I will **not** be repeating those.

A lot of people know **something** about Momo, or have at least seen the image.

Momo was a meme and moral panic that **cropped up** in 2018, and **peaked** in early 2019.

The image became infamous, it's a face with **buggy eyes** with no eyelids, not much of a nose, just exposed nostrils, **voldemort style**, and a **smile from ear to ear**, but not in a charming way.

It's a creepy image.

But despite her looks, Momo was more well known for the lore that accompanied her.

The stories were that she was threatening children, how she did this and why changed over time.

First she was forcing children to complete dangerous tasks on **Whatsapp**, then she was appearing and threatening children directly in **Youtube videos**, finally she was on **SNL**.

Sometimes she was convincing children to **kill themselves**, sometimes she was ready to kill, sometimes she **just** wanted to show them gore videos, sometimes she was trying to **steal your data**.

The last one sounds more realistic than the others, but they're all **equally** far from reality.

Reality, in this case, is that Momo was created by a **special effects** artist named **Kaisuke Aiso** in 2016, and her original name was not Momo.

She was a rubber statue created for an art show at Vanilla Gallery in the Ginza District of Tokyo.

Vanilla Gallery shows some very cool art, I recommend checking it out, but a lot of it is **pretty freaky**, in a **Not Safe for Work** way, so fair warning on that.

No kinkshaming here, obviously, that is podcast policy.

Aiso is a talented special effects artist and runs a company called **Link Factory**, which specializes in creating practical horror effects.

He was invited to participate in a show themed around **ghosts**.

Also chose to make a representation of a type of **yokai**, a supernatural entity in Japanese folklore, known as an **ubume**.

**Ubume** are the spiritual embodiment of women who have died during childbirth.

In folklore they often appear on roadsides, wearing **blood soaked clothing** and clutching an infant in their arms.

The stories go that they approach travelers and ask that they take their baby.

If the traveler agrees, it will then be revealed to be anything from **a bundle of grass**, to a **stone** that grows heavier until it crushes the traveler to death.

I could not find why the traveler could not **drop** the **rock** before it crushes them, but we'll just chalk that up to curses.

The characters used to write *ubume* translate to "**Child Snatching Bird.**"

If it drives you crazy that the *ubume* **does not snatch children**, there is another *yokai* called the *ubumetori*.

The *ubumetori* is a bird that looks for laundry hanging out to dry overnight, and **smears cursed blood** on the clothes.

Then the people who **wear** the blood stained clothes, die.

The *ubumetori* also **sometimes just snatches babies**. There you have it.

With those **yokai** in your head, you're probably thinking the statue is a bird lady.

You'd be right. What you would be wrong to think, is that it has wings, objectively the coolest thing about a bird monster.

The statue consists of a head on some **boobs and bird legs**. It is **very** top heavy, which is why there's a giant metal pole holding it up.

I would also estimate that the statue is between four and five feet, which is way bigger than I initially thought.

I thought we were talking anime figurine size.

Aiso named his creation, **Mother Bird**.

That's about it for Mother Bird's story, she was created for a **temporary art installation**, Aiso said she was not built to last.

She was thrown out soon after the gallery show ended. **End of Mother Bird.**

I couldn't find any information on how the show went, some coverage seemed needlessly mean.

Such as saying that the statue was "not a hit."

I don't know if it was a hit, but people took pictures with the statue and posted them on social media, which will become relevant **now**.

Two years after the show, on **July 10th, 2018**, a redditor named **AlmightySosa00** posted a cropped image of Mother Bird's face on r/creepy.

Within a couple of days, images were circulating the Spanish-speaking internet with Whatsapp numbers attached.

Kids were apparently sending the image to one another, saying that she was a monster and you had to do whatever she said.

A Youtuber named **ElDeadpool**, which translates literally to, the deadpool made a video texting the number, where nothing happened.

In a few days, a Youtuber named **Reignbot** posted a video where she identified what had now come to be known as **Momo**, as a statue created by Kaisuke Aiso.

Real shoutout to Reignbot for **getting the assignment**.

No shoutout to the **Argentinian police**, or **any police**.

On **July 25th** the Buenos Aires Times reported on the death by suicide of a **12 year old girl**.



The police linked her death to the use of **social media** and participation in the "**Momo game**".

The evidence they presented was that her phone was **found near her body**, and that she had **videos on her phone** that she had intended to post on social media.

The article reported that "**Momo has already caused concern in several European countries.**"

I could find **no** supporting evidence of this.

In August two more suicide deaths were linked to the **Momo Challenge**.

This time in Colombia, with a **12 year old girl and a 16 year old boy**.

A law enforcement official said in a radio interview:

“Young people are **accessing it**, the game has several challenges, they are accessing them and, in the end, **it leads to suicide to finish the game.**”

There was never further evidence linking these deaths to the **Momo Game**.

This did not stop law enforcement agencies around the world from treating this as a real threat.

In September the **State Police of Tabasco** in Mexico published an infographic, warning about Momo.

The infographic warned that she came from dark internet message boards and **targeted children**.

What I find interesting about this infographic is that it features **a whole body image of Momo in the gallery**, next to a girl dressed in Lolita fashion.

I'm not saying that law enforcement believed that Momo was actually an **internet entity menacing children.**

I'm just saying that **they were a couple Google searches away** from debunking the whole thing.

The discovery of the gallery images, prompted some people to report that Momo was the creation of a **Japanese artist using actual human and bird body parts.**

That really just **feels racist** to me.

The Kolkata police in India tweeted out a Powerpoint presentation breaking down **Momo's MO:**

- Targeting adolescents
- Tempting teens to message them on Whatsapp
- Giving a series of increasingly dangerous tasks
- Threatening the children with violence if the tasks were not met.

The Odisha tweeted:

**“Don’t meddle with her. She is dangerous, dirty and disastrous to your life”**

The Spanish National police put out a warning **not to accept any Whatsapp messages** from Momo.

Pakistan issued a **nationwide ban** on “suicide games.”

The Federal Information Technology minister of Pakistan warned that **suicide games were “key players in suicides taking place worldwide.”**

Florida was Momo’s entry point to the US law enforcement freak-out.

The St. John’s Sheriff department tweeted out **“DO YOU KNOW MOMO, YOUR KIDS MIGHT?”** All Caps, like a real professional

The Pasco Sheriff sent out their own warning:

We haven't received any reports on this in Pasco but **we merely want to share this warning that law enforcement agencies from several countries are putting out.** We want to remind parents to always be aware of what their kids are doing on social media.

In early February Momo was blamed in the UK for two incidents.

One where a child **threatened his classmates** that Momo would invade their homes while they slept.

Another where a mother reported that **Momo was edited into a child-aimed Youtube video** and instructed her son to **"take a knife to his throat."**

These incidents gained some media attention and increased the buzz around Momo to the point where **Kim Kardashian posted about Momo.**

Kardashian posted two Instagram stories to her then **130 million followers.**

The first post was a screenshot of a **Facebook post** describing Momo.

The post warned that “**there’s this thing called Momo**” that was inserted into Youtube and Kids Youtube.

Momo was telling children to kill themselves, telling children to turn stoves on when everyone else was asleep, and threatening children with violence if they didn’t comply.

The poster warned that it was **hidden in normal videos**, and that:

**“There’s also videos of cartoons doing sexual things, violent things and they may look innocent enough at first glance but trust they aren’t!”**

Her second post was a **screenshot** of a **chat with a screenshot, of a Facebook post** which further described the risk of Momo.

I'm going to read the post in full:

"So this **momo character** on Youtube pops up in kid videos and tells them how to commit suicide or to do things like cut the stove on while their parents are sleeping or to stick forks in electrical outlets and **all other types of bs** and she tells them if they tell their parents she will show up to their house and kill them and **no one is doing anything about it**. Y'all be careful letting your kids watch stuff on YouTube and **it's videos [that] most 2-5 year old watch!!!!** I showed the picture of her to my neighbors kids and **her 5 year old knew exactly who she was**. She is on Youtube kids and regular Youtube."

Kardashian tagged Youtube with the message "**Please help!!!!**"

Within a week **Snopes** had published an article **debunking the myth** of Momo.

They found **no verifiable instances** where someone actually **played the suicide game**, they were **unable to contact a Momo Whastapp line**, or **find videos featuring Momo instructing children to harm themselves or others**.

YouTube announced that they were **unable to find any videos** like the ones described in the posts, but announced they would **demonetize videos featuring the image**.

In March, **Aiso came forward** with a message:

**Momo was destroyed** soon after the gallery show.

Aiso said that he began **receiving hate mail in late 2018**, receiving at its peak, **30 emails per day**.



Aiso was **confused by the hatred he received**, and wished his work was not used without his permission.

He also said that he believed that **as long as no one gets hurt**, it's healthy and normal for children to experience fear.

Aiso is still active on social media and in filmmaking, and he does sell Momo merch, so he has **managed to secure the bag**.

Momo occupied a strange place in online lore, because some of the things she was accused of, have happened.

The believability of her actions is part of what made parents so scared of this figure.

There **is some dark shit** on kids' Youtube, things that make pregnant Spider-man look pedestrian.

There is a video which features animated characters that are interrupted by a **real person** walking on screen, pretending to hold a knife and saying:

“Remember kids, **sideways for attention, longways for results. End it.**”

There is the real potential that a child on the internet can be **exposed to disturbing images.**

It is not unreasonable **to be concerned** about what children may see online.

Momo, and other suicide games also serve as an explanation for a **complicated issue.**

Suicide is now the **second leading cause of death** globally for people aged 10-24.

I found a 2019 literature review examining the relationship between self-harm and social media in adolescents.

The article asserted the following:

There **is evidence** that **excessive social media and internet** use can increase suicide risks in adolescents.

However, these studies also found heightened suicide risks in adolescents who classified themselves as "**never using the internet**"

The lowest suicide rates were among "**occasional internet users.**"

Social media can both **suggest and reinforce** negative thoughts or emotions.

The internet can provide **access to information on how to commit suicide**, and there is research showing that **the intensity of search trends among a population can correlate to the number of suicides**.

But, and this is a big but, there are **a significant portion of young people** who feel that they receive more support from **their online communities than their offline communities**.

Content analysis of posts related to self-harm on social media showed that they are **not usually used to encourage others to self-harm**, but to process difficult emotions and inspire recovery.

Unfortunately, we do not have a **single monster** to blame for increased rates of suicide and self-harm.

The **plausibility**, combined with the narrative's being pushed by **law enforcement, media, and social media influencers**, made the spread of this hoax, well, viral.

Momo was easily **debunked** within weeks of her appearance, but it didn't matter.

The top comment on the first Reddit post is this:

"This was the first time something has legitimately fucked me up on this subreddit. When I scrolled onto that pic I was immediately scared and tried to stare it down til it looked fake enough, but it never happened and had to bitch out to the comments so I wouldn't have to look at it anymore."

The initial instinct of most people was not to look beyond the surface.

It was a cropped photo of Momo that became notorious, it was not the statue.

The context around her did not matter, zoom out and you would have seen the title card accompanying the statue, the supports built into her, and even gallery visitors.

It wasn't the background on Momo that people cared about, it was the threat and the fear that she invoked and the clear-cut explanation she provided for a complicated issue.

Yet, even though no one cared about the folklore behind her, the reality of her creation and purpose, she wound up filling a similar role to that set out by the *ubume*.

Scaring the shit out of kids.

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